

The Other Zions



*The Lost Histories of
Jewish Nations*

ERIC MARONEY

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For Kasia again, and this time
for Samuel and Ariel

With the loss of their country, the Jewish people lost their independence and fell into a decay, which is not compatible with existence as a whole vital organism. The state was crushed before the eyes of the nations. But after the Jewish people had ceased to exist as an actual state, as a political entity, they could nevertheless not submit to total annihilation—they lived on spiritually as a nation. The world saw in this people the uncanny form of one of the dead walking among the living.

—Leon Pinsker, from his *Auto-Emancipation*, 1882

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PREFACE

Few people realize that Jews have had politically independent states outside of the land traditionally associated with Jewish political independence, or the area roughly equivalent to today's State of Israel. A simple binary notion about Jewish political self-determination is usually applied to Jewish history: there are the Jews who live in Israel and those who live abroad, called the Diaspora. The common notion is that Jews who live in Israel (today, and during certain times in the past) have an independent state, while those abroad live in varying degrees of oppression in the countries where they have settled. This formula leaves out a powerful counterexample: during certain times, Jews have had independent states, kingdoms, and tribal confederations, often far from the Land of Israel.

Even in the well-trodden mainstream study of Judaism's long history, such "other" Zions often receive only a passing mention. The most noted are those which were part of the wider world of politics in their time, like the Khazar Kingdom in the Caspian region. Others, like the Jews of Ethiopia, or the Beta Israel, are noted because they have recently been in the news, and associated newspaper reports glancingly mention that in the past they had their own independent kingdom. Beyond that, it is not widely known that Jews sometimes had polities beyond the traditional lands of Zion. This book sets out to tell that story. This history has not been presented in one place and seldom in a format for nonprofessionals. Most often, the stories of these states have been told within the narrow confines of specialists' journals or outside the arena of Jewish studies, in other fields of study and specialization. It is my hope that *The Other Zions* will shed light on an underrepresented area of Jewish history.

Of course, independent Jewish states in the Land of Israel, mostly chronicled in the accounts in the Hebrew Bible, in books outside the Bible (such as the books of the Maccabees), and in some other sources, are well-known and extensively commented upon. Generations of scholars

have examined Jewish political self-determination, and in the modern era, with the rise of modern Jewish nationalism and its fruit, the State of Israel, the idea of Jewish statecraft has assumed a new importance. In fact, the new emerging Jewish nationalism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its claims to the Holy Land, were based on the Bible. Key figures of early Zionism and the early State of Israel were avid readers of the Hebrew Bible. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and the leader of the prestate "government" of the Yishuv, or the Jewish community in Palestine, often quoted the Bible and referenced it as a justification for the Jewish settlement of the Holy Land. In the prestate Jewish communities in Palestine, and after the founding of the State of Israel, such a profound commitment to the Hebrew Bible was not uncommon. Groups often went on hikes in the countryside to tour areas where famous biblical events purportedly occurred, like the Elah Valley, where David's slaying of Goliath is said to have taken place. This use of the Hebrew Bible was not primarily religious. It was nationalistic, and in a narrower sense, it was parochial: Hebrew speakers could read in Hebrew of the exploits of their ancestors on the very soil where those events occurred. This achieved two goals: it further justified the Zionist enterprise in Palestine, and later it supported the continued existence of the State of Israel. But the astonishing success of Zionism had an unintended consequence: it effectively ignored the complexity of two thousand years of Jewish history. With some exceptions, the events of the Hebrew Bible take place entirely in the Land of Israel. It is a text of a nation in its national home. But other, important works in Jewish history, like the Talmud, were not typically read by Israelis on hiking trips because such texts catered to Jews in exile. In the new expression of Jewishness coming about in Israel, works like the Talmud, along with its impact on Jewishness, could be confidently ignored or pointedly derided. Judaism's political element and the Land of Israel were seen as one and the same. Jewish life away from Israel (or at least, away from Israel as an independent nation) was seen as having been necessarily servile. The great tribulations of the Jewish people in exile—the pogroms, dislocations, forced conversions, and worse—were considered ample proof of this. This may be true for some of Jewish history in the Diaspora, but not for all of it; as *The Other Zions* will show, Jews were often capable of founding and maintaining their own states far away from the Land of Israel.

A few words are necessary about the choice of subjects and the method of this work. By and large, I have chosen examples of Jews who established states that were politically "independent." Defining this term is a challenging task, since the concept of independence is broad and subject

to change. By independence I mean, ideally, that the states I examine were free to choose their own political destinies, were free of outside influence in their domestic affairs, had sovereignty over a piece of territory, and had an army or an armed force to protect their autonomy. A great range of Jewish “states” is examined in this work, spanning from complex kingdoms like Jewish Khazaria to tribal confederations like the Jews of Arabia. Each is unique and expressed its autonomy in different ways. The notion of a state or nation changed over time and place. There is no unique or single definition of a nation or state. Yet they share a common element: they controlled their political destinies. Gentile states or powers did not determine their political affairs.

The eight examples of “other” Zions detailed here are mostly from antiquity, and one example—the kingdom of the Lost Tribes of Israel—is almost entirely legendary, with a core of historical truth at its center. In fact, many examples of Jewish states outside the Land of Israel are steeped in legend. It is often difficult, but not wholly impossible, to tell where legend ends and history begins in the study of these other Zions. The quality of the sources at hand is often questionable for the study of these Jewish states. Many documents have been embellished over time. Here, some space is devoted to examining the issues of the historicity of these kingdoms. This book suggests that the legendary character of these states is part of the tenacity of their lasting memory: they are made of accumulated details laid over a core of historical truth. This assumption is not without its problems, and the reader should realize this before starting out on this investigation. Of course, such challenges are valid and important. But *The Other Zions* is not about the scholarly controversy surrounding these Jewish states. As much as possible, this will be an introduction to the states themselves. For the devoted reader, the notes and bibliography will provide more detailed (and often technical) reading about the examples explored in this work.

Finally, this work, as an excursion in the study of Jewish history, attempts to push back the boundaries of widely accepted notions—primarily that Jewish states have only existed in the Land of Israel, and that Jews in exile have (until relatively recently) always been a subservient minority whose communal and individual existence was at all times at the whim of gentile rulers. This notion suggests that Jews no longer had political impulses following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, and especially after the conclusion of the disastrous Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 CE. The historical assumption is that following the first century, Judaism’s political element slumbered, only to reawaken with the ardent nationalism of the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century, whose strenuous

efforts led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. *The Other Zions* will show that Jews have enjoyed political and military dominance elsewhere during the long years between 135 and 1948 CE.

I would like to thank my wife, Kasia Maroney, whose hard work and support make me a far better writer. Without her efforts, I could not write a single word. Fellow writer Jon Frankel was helpful in reading an early version of this work and offering suggestions. Denise Oswald, as always, was very helpful in providing publishing advice and support. I could not write without the love of my family: Robert and Rosemarie Maroney, Karen Paralikas, Jim and Lois Kozlowski, and my children, Samuel and Ariel. Finally, thanks to Suzanne I. Staszak-Silva for her early help with publishing this manuscript and to Sarah Stanton, who was an advocate for this book and found it a home at Rowman & Littlefield.

ONE

A NEUTRAL PIECE OF LAND: THE JEWISH STATE

THE OTHER ZIONS

At various times and in various places, Jews have established independent states outside the Land of Israel, which is the traditional territory of Jewish political autonomy. These “other Zions” have spanned the length of Jewish history. Chronologically, the first was founded just before the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE), in the Kingdom of Adiabene in the Parthian Empire. The final example, known as the Jewish Autonomous Region, was created in 1928 as a Yiddish-speaking homeland for Jews and still exists as a province of the Russian Republic. These other Zions are seldom studied and little known.

But of course, the attachment of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland of Israel is far better known. The Bible continues to be the most widely read book in the Western world and has been translated into most languages. Anyone can read of the Jewish people’s attachment to the Land of Israel beginning with Abraham and moving down through the prophets and the end of Jewish political autonomy in the Books of Kings. For Jews, the yearning for Zion has taken on a multitude of forms. The most important form for most modern, secular Jews is a devotion to the most recent manifestation of the love of Zion: the State of Israel, founded in 1948. As a people in exile for most of their history, Jews have created religion, culture, language, and folk customs that have been permeated by this hope of a return to the Holy Land. Yet in spite of this, Jews have formed independent states outside of the traditional boundaries of the Land of Israel. These bold, daring, and little-known experiments in Jewish political autonomy outside of the Holy Land will be our focus.¹

A PERSISTENT LEGEND

During the Middle Ages—a span of time usually bracketed by the third to the fourteenth centuries—tales were told of Jewish states away from the Holy Land and outside of the known world. These stories were told as folk tales, legends, and myths. Many Europeans and Middle Easterners told of giant Jews who possessed a kingdom of their own beyond the reaches of the explored world. These Jews were often thought to be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, long ago carried away into captivity by the Assyrians when they sacked their home in Samaria in 722 BCE. According to these myths, once in exile these tribes formed a vital and strong Jewish nation outside the Holy Land.

There was a popular legend in German lands during the eleventh and twelfth centuries about the Red Jews, who were a nation of Hebrews living beyond Europe in the hinterlands of Asia. According to these tales, one day the Red Jews would descend from their mountain hideout and avenge the persecution of their fellow Jews in Europe and the lands of Islam. The tale of the Red Jews, like many folk traditions, was compiled from many sources. Foremost, it was based on Christian and Jewish apocalyptic notions common at the close of the first millennium. From Christian readings of the Book of Revelation, it was widely believed that the Jews would play a vital role in the salvation of the world. But it was hard to envision that a people divested of their land, lacking political and in some places economic freedom, and without an army could play the military role necessary for the Christian end times. So the legend of the Red Jews filled this gap. The story of their origins was told with legendary material about Alexander the Great. Supposedly, the renowned Macedonian conqueror was afraid of the martial prowess of this Jewish nation, so he contained them behind a large wall to protect civilization from their warlike tendencies. They also became associated with Gog and Magog, the Biblical destroyers of the Apocalypse featured in Ezekiel 38–39 and reinterpreted in Revelation 20. They also were thought of as descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel—long believed by many Jews and Christians to be only temporarily lost. These tribes were said to possess a large army in the East that would eventually avenge Christian abuse of Western Jews. And, as we would expect, the Red Jews were also associated with satanic influences. Their role became linked with the Antichrist, another key player of the Christian end times, when Christians believe a triumphant Christ will return to the earth to inaugurate his reign. The Red Jews became a receptacle for Christian fears about Jews: they were an oppressed people who were seemingly weak but perhaps secretly powerful, who

would one day turn on their oppressors. The Red Jews struck a note of terror among Christians. For them, Jews could represent the antipathies that lie at the heart of the Christian dark imagination about Judaism: that they are a seemingly weak people who are actually powerful, a bookish people who are also warlike, and deniers of Christ who will play a key role in Christ's redemption.²

For Jews, however, the relationship to long-lost brethren who had political and military autonomy was far less ambivalent. Judaism has always had a nationalistic component. Like Islam, the other great Abrahamic religion of the Middle East, Judaism was never wholly divorced from its nationalistic elements, and in a closely allied way, from the claims it made to a section of land that God promised the people of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. The history of occupying this land, being evicted from it, and occupying it once again in numerous cycles through history, is told and retold in the Bible. Sometime after the division of the United Monarchy, the Assyrians carried the Northern Tribes of Israel into exile in 722 BCE, and they disappeared from the stage of history and became a stock of abiding legends for Jews and Christians alike.

After the exile of the Northern Tribes, there followed the destruction of the southern Kingdom of Judah by Babylon, starting in 587 BCE and ending with the sacking of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE; following this, most Judeans went into exile in Babylon. Political freedom ended for the Jews living in the Holy Land. Fifty years later, the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and many Judeans chose to return to the Holy Land and rebuild the Temple there in 515 BCE. Political freedom during this time was largely nominal, and successive empires ruled Judea with more or less total control. The only period of complete independence was after the Hasmonean (Maccabean) rebellion starting in 167 BCE, but this breath of freedom was brief, lasting only about one hundred years.

This period was followed by the long Roman rule of Judea, during which complete Jewish independence (chaotic as it was) occurred during the Jewish revolt against Rome from 66–73 CE and the Bar Kokhba Revolt against Rome from 132–135 CE. Following these revolts, Jewish political independence in the Holy Land would not occur again until the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.³

But in the nearly two thousand years following Bar Kokhba's failed rebellion and the partition of Palestine by the United Nations in 1947 into Jewish and Arab states, independent Jewish kingdoms, nations, and tribes existed. Stories like that of the Red Jews, fanciful and legendary as they were, were not uncommon. In particular, Jews treasured stories about Jewish kingdoms outside the Land of Israel for a vital and obvious

reason: for a politically powerless people, the tales of Jewish kingdoms had a strong element of wish fulfillment. Such stories may also have intrigued Jews by going against the grain of the messianic notion that the Jews would only be politically independent with the coming of a descendant of the House of David. Jewish law forbade Jews to take the Holy Land on their own initiative and without their God's Messiah. So the Messiah would accomplish the resettlement of the Jews in Israel through (in some versions) supernatural feats, like carrying away all the Jews in a cloud to the Holy Land. But interestingly, the dictates of Jewish law did not prevent Jews from envisioning and realizing independent Jewish states outside the messianic context, and beyond the boundaries of the Holy Land.

A PORTION OF THE GLOBE

The idea that Jews could have a state outside the boundaries of Israel sometimes occurred in Jewish history in unlikely places. In the late nineteenth century, during the early days of Zionism (or the modern movement to create a Jewish state in the Ottoman province of Palestine, and later the British Mandate in Palestine from 1923 to 1948) some Zionist leaders—most notably Theodor Herzl, the founding father of Zionism—supported the idea of locating a Jewish state beyond Palestine.⁴

Herzl was Zionism's unlikely advocate. Not long after he was born in Budapest in 1860, his family moved to Vienna. Herzl was imbued with pre-Great War Viennese Austrian bourgeois culture. He was trained as a lawyer but spent most of his professional career as a journalist, playwright, and novelist.⁵ He was scrupulously well-heeled and snobbish, and as such he was a man of culture and breeding defined and confined by the tastes of his time. The young Herzl seemed unsuited to take the lead in the cause of Jewish national independence. He cared little for religious Judaism; until late in his life, he was largely an advocate of assimilation for European Jews. He paid little attention to the masses of Eastern European Jews who lived a marginal existence in the Austrian and Russian Empires, except to disdain them. He knew no Hebrew and cared little about Jewish affairs. By all accounts, everything about Herzl suggested frivolity and shallowness: his literary productions were uninspired, and his journalism often skimmed the surface of the subjects he investigated, being far more descriptive than political or analytical in nature.⁶ He was a rarefied, conservative character who wished to maintain the political and social *status quo* for the Jews in Europe.

Yet he had qualities that the burgeoning Zionist movement needed. At the turn of the twentieth century, Zionism did not have an umbrella organization capable of uniting its various groups. Herzl was to effect this change for Zionism. He had a flair for the dramatic, and an organizational acumen the Zionist cause lacked. Herzl was brought to the table of Zionism by the notorious Dreyfus Affair. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French Army, was accused of passing on secrets to the German Embassy in Paris. He was charged with treason and convicted by the use of false documents and faked testimony. The Dreyfus Affair caused the widespread anti-Semitism of French society to flare. For men like Herzl, long accustomed to viewing France as the bastion of reason and democracy in Europe, this outbreak of Jew-hating was profoundly disturbing. The Dreyfus Affair and the election of an anti-Semitic mayor in Vienna brought Herzl to the cause of a Jewish homeland.⁷ Herzl had come to see assimilation for the Jews as merely a chimera.

From the mid-nineteenth century forward, ancient religiously inspired hatred of Jews was transformed into the modern version of anti-Semitism, or the belief that Jews were not merely a deviant religious group but also an inferior race. Herzl predicted an imminent catastrophe for European Jewry. He became convinced that the only safe haven for Jews would be in their own nation. He convened the first Zionist Conference in Basel in 1897, which quickly became an umbrella organization for Zionism's multifaceted and fragmented groups that were often at odds with each other. He used his connections as a journalist to establish a Zionist newspaper. He wrote articles and gave lectures. And he was a tireless traveler, taking the cause of Jewish national self-determination all over the globe.

Herzl believed in the rational capacity of human beings, maintaining that even human nature, although often convoluted by external forces, ultimately was crystal clear. An unshakable faith in reason gripped Europe in the decades before the First World War and influenced Herzl's belief that human beings were predictable animals. So Herzl's brand of Zionism was deeply influenced by a belief in the saving power of reason. The two major works he bequeathed to Zionism, *The Jewish State* and *Old New Land*, bear the imprint of Herzl's faith in reason. Reason, Herzl believed, would eventually win over superstition and backwardness of all kinds. He had no doubt that the persistent problems of the Jews—their political weakness, their social decline, and their cultural marginality—could be solved by reason and its handmaid, technology. Alongside this belief in human rationality was a faith in the nationalist movements of the mid-to-late-century. Herzl and his form of Zionism were the heirs to the French Revolution of 1789–1799, with its ideals about national and ethnic self-dependence, as well

as the nationalistic movements of the Italian *Risorgimento* from 1861–1871, the Greek war for independence from Turkey from 1821–1831, and a host of other political and cultural revolutions in small states in Europe.⁸ The Jews should have their own country, Herzl determined, because they were like any other people: a nation with a common history and destiny. He held that the peculiar circumstances of their exile led to all sorts of distortions of their intellects—which was a particular fixation in his writings—and also their sense of national character. But once they had their own state, he asserted, this would all be remedied.

And what sort of state did Herzl envision? He imagined a country that few Israelis would recognize, one replete with all sorts of dramatic ironies that were, astonishingly, only perceived by the most acute critics in his own day. Firstly, he assigned a global purpose for the Jewish state. In his book called *The Jewish State*, he says that “The Jewish State is essential to the world; it will therefore be created.”⁹ What exactly is the nature of this essentiality? Later in the book, it becomes apparent that he believed that the indispensable element of his Jewish state would be not only the creation of a homeland for an oppressed people who are in mortal danger, but also the bringing of science and technology to Palestine. Herzl, in *The Jewish State*, fails to mention that Palestine is the home to native Arabs who may be less than satisfied with the settlement of their land by European Jews. Herzl’s early imaginings of Palestine were largely divorced from the geopolitical realities of the day. But to be fair, Palestine is not Herzl’s only option. He simply wants for the Jews a “sovereignty . . . over a portion of the globe,”¹⁰ and some “neutral piece of land.”¹¹ In fact, the piece of land is such a low priority to the matter at hand that he states that Palestine or Argentina would both be equally attractive. Argentina already has a colony of Jews, while Palestine, Herzl says, has the benefit of being close to the Jewish heart.

The Jewish State then proceeds to outline how the new state will be developed on numerous fronts. Again and again, the reader is assured that the location of the state is unimportant. The land is treated as a blank canvas which will be amenable to easy manipulation. And further: Herzl asserts that whatever ruling authority exists in that land will welcome the Jews because of their special skills. Herzl absorbed many anti-Jewish prejudices (especially about the inclination of Jews toward excellence in finance) and expresses them eloquently in his writings. Thus, he claims the Ottomans will welcome the Jews because they could “undertake to regulate the whole finance of Turkey,”¹² and help arrest the decay of the Turkish state, which had been in a long decline since the end of the seventeenth century. Similarly, a Jewish state in Palestine would become

"a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism."¹³ The Jewish state is essential to the world, it seems, since it will hold back Asians from the gates of Europe long enough to ultimately civilize these hordes at the table of European manners.

But we should not think that Herzl's Jewish state will be a place where Jews will radically transform themselves. Herzl had a low opinion of the Jewish common people, particularly in Eastern Europe, viewing them as backward intellectually and in need of the same civilizing forces that would transform Asians. So Herzl's state would keep the class structure of nineteenth-century Europe, along with its languages and customs. He says quite clearly that "we shall remain in the new country what we are now." Hebrew would not be the language of the nation, since "who amongst us has a sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language?"¹⁴ The European languages that Jews used would be taken to the Jewish state and employed. Herzl's Jewish state would resemble a polyglot utopian version of Switzerland, where German, French, and Italian coexist. But this does not extend to "those miserable stunted jargons, those Ghetto languages which we still employ, for these were the stealthy tongues of prisoners."¹⁵ Here Herzl is referring disdainfully to Yiddish.¹⁶ So apparently, in the new country not all Jews would remain what they had been, but instead would be elevated to a new level of culture they did not previously enjoy in Eastern European lands.

Herzl's vision of the new Jewish state was extremely conservative. Herzl and those in his camp were content to remain in Europe if Christian Europeans would allow them. But since they were no longer welcome, a separate Jewish state was the only answer to the perplexing problem of the Jews. Since the material and cultural life of Western European Jews was generally good (but for the rising tide of anti-Semitism) there seemed little reason why very much should change for them in the Jewish state. It should simply be an enclave of Europe somewhere else in the world—in Argentina, Palestine, Uganda, or the Sinai—and eventually all the Jews in the world would decide to settle there simply due to the self-evident benefits of being Jews in a Jewish state. Herzl's Zion, like many examples in this book, could be created almost anywhere.

THE HEART OF THE PEOPLE

Zionism, from its very early days at the end of the nineteenth century, was by no means a unified movement. A number of factions with competing visions about the nature of the Jewish state vied for control. One camp has

come to be known as the cultural Zionists, and one of its most outspoken proponents was Ahad Ha'am, born Asher Ginsberg (1854–1922). His pen name means “One of the People” in Hebrew, which did not exactly suit him. Although Ahad Ha'am was a champion of the “common” Jew, or the *Ostjuden* of Eastern Europe, his mind was anything but common.

He was in most ways the very antithesis of Herzl and his followers. The son of a rabbi from Russia, Ahad Ha'am was brought up in the religious world of Chasidism, an Eastern European religious movement that stressed piety and religious enthusiasm. Even when Ahad Ha'am left the orbit of traditional religious Judaism, he carried many of its aspirations into secular culture. Ahad Ha'am believed that a return to the Jewish homeland must be preceded by a return to cultural Judaism. Ahad Ha'am was a fervent Hebraist. For him the revival of the Hebrew language was synonymous with the revival of a Jewish culture and state, and that state could only be founded in one place: Palestine, the traditional homeland of the Jews, which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a province of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Unlike Herzl, a pragmatist who wanted an immediate homeland for the Jews even if it was outside the traditional bounds of Zion, Ahad Ha'am could not envision a Jewish state outside the Holy Land. The debate between Herzl and Ahad Ha'am, and between the political and cultural Zionists, was one of the earliest divisions in the history of Zionism. The questions this debate created became a template for later conflicts: Was modern Zionism bound to the Holy Land? If Jews were truly a nation, or capable of forming a nation, did they *need* the Land of Israel? And how Jewish should a Jewish state be?

Ahad Ha'am was deeply critical of Herzl and political Zionism. In several pointed essays, he took aim at their goals and ambitions, and even their commitment to Judaism. He framed the debate in terms of cultural and spiritual values, rather than primarily political ones. Ahad Ha'am found the culturally neutered nation in *The Jewish State* abhorrent and wondered if it had any Jewish identity at all. For him, the nation was not strictly a political construct, but a metaphysical entity. It was a living, overarching abstraction: the nation is an expression of the will of a people. For Jews, he thought, this could come about nowhere else but Palestine, in no other language than a revived Hebrew, and on no other platform than a respect for the past coupled with a radical break from it: the creation of a *real* Jewish cultural identity in an independent state. He believed it would be “the heart of the people—that is the foundation on which the land will be regenerated.”¹⁷ He believed that colonization of Jews in Palestine would not create a Jewish state or a real nation with

an independent national life. He famously said that he wanted a “Jewish State and not merely a State of Jews.”¹⁸

The split between Ahad Ha’am and Herzl was also a geographical divide. The early Zionists were rent by the division of Eastern and Western Europe. Western Jews like Herzl were far more assimilated to European culture than those in the East like Ahad Ha’am, and particularly more so than the Jews in Russia, who were just emerging from the ghetto in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So it is not surprising that such radically different versions of the Zionist plan took shape along East/West lines.

Some of Ahad Ha’am’s ideas have stood the test of time better than Herzl’s. Ahad Ha’am was not afraid to say things that went against the grain of popular opinion. He was one of the first major Zionist leaders to publicly acknowledge the presence of Arabs in Palestine and the surrounding area and voice concerns about how amenable these natives might be to a large Jewish presence in their country. He was one of the first Zionist leaders to see the burgeoning nationalistic sentiments of the Palestinians and the possibility of what is now termed the “two state solution,” or the coexistence of Jewish and Palestinian states side by side. He saw a danger in using Arab labor in Jewish colonies in Palestine. Without a solution to the problem of two peoples dwelling in Palestine, he thought the reliance of Jews on cheap Arab labor would be harmful to both people: it would create an Arab lower class that relied on Hebrew employers for work, and (even more damaging for Ahad Ha’am) a class of Hebrew employers who were masters over poor Arab laborers. Ahad Ha’am believed that only Hebrew labor could benefit the Hebrew nation. He also held that one of the dreams of the political Zionists—that all the Jews in exile would migrate to the Jewish state—was a fantasy. He quite rightly predicted that most Jews would choose to remain in their native countries, with only some portion electing to live in the new state, where initially the conditions would be primitive and the dangers real. Ahad Ha’am’s clear and penetrating thinking about these points, and his fearlessness about the unsettling conclusions they might generate, did not make him popular in his day. But Ahad Ha’am is credited with great foresight by people who now confront these intractable issues.

Herzl was a secular nationalist, and he conceived of nationhood not so much as a sentimental attachment to a land, as a commitment to a set of European cultural ideals. In the very beginning, until opinion began to solidify against the “any location” option for the Jewish state, the state’s locality mattered little to Herzl. For the cultural Zionists like Ahad Ha’am, the commitment to Palestine was not fostered by

any direct attachment to religious Judaism and its messianic notions. Rather, it was suggested due to the awareness that most Jews had a firm commitment to the Land of Israel as part of their cultural and religious heritage. He believed that to ignore that commitment was not only impractical, but was in fact cultural suicide. Only a Jewish state in the traditional Land of Israel could be authentically Jewish, so only a Jewish state in Palestine would become a source of “spiritual power”¹⁹ for the bulk of Jews who remained in exile. For Ahad Ha’am, a Jewish state outside of Palestine was utterly unthinkable.

By the time Herzl died in 1904, the Zionist movement had given up attempts to locate a Jewish state anywhere but in Palestine. For the next forty years the various groups that worked under the umbrella of the Zionist Congress would move inexorably toward their goal—the creation of the State of Israel. The success of the movement was astonishing. Zionism revived a “dead” language and made it an everyday vernacular. And Zionism established a Jewish polity in the Land of Israel for the first time in nearly two thousand years. But the struggle between Herzl and Ahad Ha’am became a lasting legacy.²⁰

For secular Jews, modern Jewish identity became intimately bound with the State of Israel. But one of the fundamental paradoxes of the founding of the Jewish state, a state created to “normalize” and “regularize” Jewish people by giving them what other peoples have (a land and a nation) is that the practical results have often been the opposite of “normal.” The State of Israel was created to give Jews a safe haven from oppression, yet the state became a lightning rod for such oppression, and Jews in Israel are targeted for violence by Palestinian Arabs and neighboring Arab states *because of the simple fact that they are Jews living in a Jewish state*. The founding of the State of Israel actually established the parameters of oppression for many Jewish communities. Many ancient Jewish enclaves in Iraq, Egypt, and Syria lived with relatively little interference from local Muslims and their respective governments for many generations. But with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, these communities were targeted for reprisals, and in quick succession many Jews in Muslim lands were *forced* to immigrate to Israel. The State of Israel was created as a safe haven for Jews, but for many Jews of the Middle East, the very creation of the Jewish state put them in peril and contributed to their oppression. They were forced to emigrate from their home countries to Israel with little other choice.²¹

Israel was created in part to give Jews a safe haven from anti-Semitism. But in paradoxical ways, anti-Semitism had acted to preserve Jewish identity in many lands. The opposite phenomenon, philo-Semitism, seems to

have done as much to erode Jewish identity as anti-Semitism. Western nations who have embraced Jews as equal citizens have seen Jewish intermarriage rates rise over and above 50 percent, and associated Jewish identity has weakened.

The foundation of the State of Israel also placed the notion of Jewish identity in crisis even while transforming it. Jewish identity in the Diaspora, or populations of Jews living outside Israel, became bound up with the plight of Israel almost from its inception. Increasingly, secular Jews in Western countries, alienated from Jewish religious traditions, took on the mantle of Israel's sovereignty as a new marker of Jewish identity. Yet the paradox here is apparent: if Israel was established to give Jews an identity as a people like any other people, where does the specific tag of loyalty lie? What exactly is a secular Jewish identity? How does the Israeli differ from the Jew, and how are they similar? Divorced from a religious Jewish context, long the traditional marker of who was a Jew,²² what are the special cultural, historical, and social forces that make the Jewish state an object of loyalty?

All these forms of Jewish political self-expression, as paradoxical as they may be, are bound to Israel, the traditional land of Jewish habitation. For many, this was the home of the Jewish people, and their long exile in other lands was simply an intermission until the ingathering of Jews to the Jewish homeland. Modern political Zionism and secular Israeli culture are the latest manifestations of this powerful cyclical history. As inevitably flawed as it was, the founding of the State of Israel was a solution to "the Jewish problem." The Zionist enterprise, despite its shortcomings, was a resounding success, creating a new Jew who had an opportunity to become a potent force in the modern world. As a consequence, Zionist history and ideology tended to ignore other Jewish states, nations, tribes, and kingdoms.

JEWISH STATES OUTSIDE THE HOLY LAND

Despite the devotion of religious Judaism and secular Zionism to the restoration of Jews to their traditional land, Jews have also established independent nations, kingdoms, and tribal confederations outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel. The examination of these polities provides an excellent opportunity to view novel experiments in Jewish political autonomy. But we must be cautious. With one exception, all these states were established in antiquity or in the Middle Ages, and the historical record of them is often incomplete. Layers of myth and legend

accrued around these states and kingdoms, making a purely historical survey challenging. The tales told of Jewish political autonomy outside Palestine were extremely popular; to a dispossessed people, who were far-flung and often persecuted minorities in Christian or Muslim lands, tales of Jewish kingdoms offered a vision of political self-determination that was lacking in their own communities and had not existed since the Bar Kokhba Revolt ended with catastrophic defeat and displacement in 135 CE. Many of these tales of Jewish kingdoms outside the Land of Israel had the flavor of medieval romance and provided an escape into a chivalrous world of court manners that were a self-conscious modeling on the values of the aristocratic world of the Middle Ages in Europe. This is most often found in the tales of the Lost Tribes of Israel, who became a kind of template for Jewish self-determination in the centuries and decades before the birth of political Zionism in the nineteenth century.

The Lost Tribes of Israel, or Ten Tribes of Israel, were part of the northern confederation of Israelite tribes who had split away from the two other tribes to the south around 920 BCE. In the legendary account told in the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, the Israelites were a confederation of tribes who lacked a central political organization. Only with the rise of a monarchy were all the Israelite tribes united as a single nation. But with the death of Solomon, this unity was destroyed, and the entire span of the Israelite united government under Saul, David, and Solomon lasted no more than eighty years. Following the death of Solomon, the Northern Tribes, always culturally and religiously dissimilar from the Southern ones (and perhaps speaking a different Hebrew dialect)²³ split off from the southern tribes and formed their own kingdom, usually called the Kingdom of Israel, or Samaria. The southern Kingdom of Judah was named after the most powerful southern tribe, but it was also composed of Benjaminites and Levites.

The name “ten tribes” is a bit misleading, as there were actually nine: Reuben, Manasseh, Ephraim, Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtali, Zebulon, and Issachar. The tribe of Reuben had most likely been assimilated to the tribe of Gad before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, while the tenth tribe was probably the Levites, who as priests did not have a share in any territory. In any case, there was a robust rivalry between the northern and southern tribes. After the division of the United Monarchy, the two small kingdoms were jostled between the two super-powers of the day: Egypt to the west and Assyria to the east. Judah and Israel both played power politics with the states that surrounded them to maintain their independence. But eventually the Assyrians invaded the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and carried many of its inhabitants into cap-

tivity. Afterward, they all but disappeared from the biblical record. As we shall see,²⁴ they were most likely carried into portions of modern-day Iran, and in a few generations were assimilated into the local population.

But the memory of the Lost Tribes continued to live in the imagination of Jews (and later many Christians) and formed the backbone of fantasies about Jewish autonomy far from the Land of Israel. In the Middle Ages, the most potent vehicles of remembrance of the tribes were found in the letters of Prester John, a mythical Christian king whose correspondence was widely read in the Middle Ages. Prester John's lands were said to border those of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. He claimed to have been locked in perpetual combat with them, which prevented these powerful and warlike Jews from swamping medieval Christendom.

His letters were translated into almost every major European language, as well as Hebrew. Prester John's letters spread the notion that a powerful, autonomous Hebrew state existed outside the known lands of Islam and Christendom. This kingdom was believed to be the embodiment of everything that most Jewish communities in the Middle Ages were not: politically independent and in possession of a large army to fight for their freedom.²⁵

Tales of the Lost Tribes proved durable: they were repeatedly told to explain the discovery of new peoples as Europeans conquered strange lands. Stories of the Lost Tribes gave Jews and Christians alike a template to understand a changing and expanding world. But most importantly of all, tales of the Lost Tribes were a remembrance of a vital political element in Judaism that was suppressed during the long years of exile. That such kingdoms might have existed outside the Land of Israel was not a point of major religious concern. What would become Rabbinical Judaism (today's version of Judaism) held that a Jewish state could only be founded by God's Messiah. But in our examples, just as Zion was an optional component to the founding of a Jewish state, so too was the coming of the Messiah unnecessary for Jews to establish their own political autonomy.

THE KEHILLIAH: A STATE WITHIN A STATE

In a sense, the seeds of political autonomy are found within Rabbinical Judaism. In the Middle Ages, Jewish communities in both Christendom and the lands of Islam were by and large given great degrees of autonomy. Many gentile rulers cared little for Jewish internal affairs as long as they did not interfere with overall governance, so Jewish communities in

Europe and the Middle East were often highly efficacious, independent political units. The internal structures of Jewish communities kept them semi-autonomous, and enabled Jews, always a minority in the nations in which they lived, to continue their traditions for generations. This included communities that existed in places far from Muslim and Christian lands, such as China and India.²⁶ So political Judaism did not truly die with Bar Kokhba—rather it mutated into the Rabbinical tradition and found its most lasting expression in the communal structures and institutions of the *kehillah*, or the traditional Jewish community.

Traditional Jewish communities were states within states. They had many of the organs of independent political life: lay and religious leadership, a body of written laws, and the ability, sometimes limited and sometimes expansive, to enforce those laws and collect money to maintain institutions and to educate the young. In some Muslim lands, the rulers of Jewish communities moved in high government circles, so much so that the ruler of a Jewish community could offer a considerable amount of influence in gentile governments.²⁷ So if Jews needed a model for self-government away from the Land of Israel, they did not have to look very far to find it: they had only to observe their own communities.

The Bible also provided important models of Jewish autonomy. Political power in the Bible found various expressions. In the legendary accounts told in Judges, both books of Samuel, and Kings, the Israelites attempted self-government in a number of stages. Different models were tried and often cast aside: a tribal confederation was ruled periodically by charismatic, God-inspired prophet-leaders in Judges; Saul was elected a king in the first book of Samuel, and eventually a monarchy was established through the line of David. The main cautionary tale of Judges revolves around the state without a central authority: in the absence of a strong leader, the Israelites lose their autonomy to other groups—most notably the Philistines. The lack of a king eventually causes a bloody civil war. Finally, Saul is appointed king, but he is often confused for a prophet and relies a great deal on charisma to govern. Saul's monarchy is a halfway point between the charismatic-prophetic leadership of Judges and the hereditary kingship of the House of David. The long chronicle of the Davidic kingship, starting in the Book of Samuel and ending in 2 Kings, narrates the vicissitudes of the monarchy.²⁸ The quality of kingship changes with time and depends in great measure on the character of the ruler. Finally, regional issues are added to the mix with the fracturing of the state into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah after Solomon's reign.

Of course, these examples of Jewish self-rule are from the Land of Israel. The states we will examine are from outside those boundaries. But Jews did not have to venture into other literature to see how to govern themselves. The books of the Hebrew Bible devote a considerable amount of space to the problem of governance. As we will see, the other Zions were established under various circumstances and by Jews from different cultural backgrounds. In many instances, conversions of gentile rulers to Judaism were involved. So another intriguing issue about Jewish identity arises: if we tend to think of the Jewish states in Israel as native, whereas the Khazar Kingdom, an example we will explore later,²⁹ as Jewish through conversion, we are confronted with the problem of Jewish identity. What makes a Jew a Jew? And what makes a Jewish Kingdom Jewish? The examples examined here will cast a new light on many common misconceptions of what Jewishness is, and by extension, the nature of a Jewish state.

THE NATIONAL IDEAL

Modern Zionism and its concrete creation, the State of Israel, provide a singular example of a Jewish state. Israelis are self-governing Jews who live in the traditional lands of Zion and speak Hebrew as their daily language. In the examples of Jewish Kingdoms explored here, the former condition did not exist, of course, and the latter almost certainly did not. The question tied to this has broader implications: what exactly is a Jewish state? The examples here will defy neat categorization. For example, few scholars doubt that the Ethiopian Jews had some degree of political autonomy in their long history. But few can agree about the extent of that autonomy. There is no genuine agreement about this topic, as there is none about the Jewish identity of the Jews of Ethiopia. Are the Ethiopian Jews to be understood as an Ethiopian phenomenon, or are they best described as a part of Diaspora Judaism or the dispersion of the Jewish people to far-reaching corners of the globe? The case of the Jews of Ethiopia proves a difficult knot of identity to untangle. As we will see, the form of Christianity practiced in Ethiopia was heavily influenced by Judaism and Jewish practices, giving the religion a distinctly “Old Testament” flavor. So the dividing line between Jews and Christians in the Ethiopian context, particularly before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was murky. Then are the Ethiopian Jews really Jews? Was their kingdom a Jewish kingdom?³⁰

The Khazar Kingdom suffers from the same confusion of identity. There is no doubt that it was a kingdom—but was it a Jewish kingdom? What role did Judaism play in its governance? Did Judaism extend down from the royal house and the few elites who adopted it around the eighth century CE, or was the state more mixed, with Christians, Muslims, and pagans in residence? And if the latter is the case, can it really be called a Jewish state at all? And if we consider the troubling reports from Muslim writers (which we will examine later) about the ritual habits of the Khazar Kings, the picture becomes considerably more muddled.

Other examples prove equally cloudy. Before the rise of Islam, Yemen was home to a vibrant Jewish community. In this atmosphere, groups of Arabs converted to Judaism or were Judaized, adopting some Jewish practices. In this mix, a king of Yemen named Dhu Nuwas converted to Judaism and established the Jewish Kingdom of Himyar (an ancient name for Yemen). He persecuted Christians, only to be defeated by a Christian coalition of Ethiopian and Byzantine troops in 525 CE, who then established a Christian state in Yemen. Here we will encounter the problem of Jewish identity again. The questions will be asked: what kind of Jewish kingdom was Himyar? What were the specific markers of Jewish identity and Jewish self-identification? What form of Judaism was practiced by Dhu Nuwas, and how justified are we to call his kingdom a Jewish state?³¹

Some kingdoms were so legendary in their flavor that getting to the bedrock of their existence and their Jewish character is challenging (but not impossible). For example, Josephus, the first-century historian and Jewish apologist, told a story in his *Jewish Antiquities* about the Kingdom of Adiabene (located mostly in modern-day Iraq) and the conversion of its royal house to Judaism. We will see how difficult it becomes to separate Josephus's story of the conversion of the royals of Adiabene from the concerns he was grappling with in the *Antiquities*. Luckily, tales about the royal house of Adiabene and their Judaism were preserved in Rabbinical literature. Both Josephus and the Rabbinical accounts of the Adiabene Jews provide complementary pictures. Yet the same questions need to be asked of the Adiabene Jews as of our other examples: what kind of Judaism was practiced there? How widespread was it? How justified are we to call this state a truly Jewish state?³²

Two further examples add to this complexity. The Jews of Arabia before the rise of Islam had a great deal of political autonomy. In the loose and fractured tribal society of pre-Islamic Arabia, they were all but independent. Before Islam, Arabia was heavily influenced by Judaism, and appears to have had tribes that were to some degree Judaized. Tribes

of Jews settled in Arabia and converted some native Arabs, and even unconverted native Arabs adopted Jewish practices. Some tribes of Jews in Arabia were independent in the years before the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE. Where does Jewish identity lie in such cases?³³ What kind of Jewish polities did they fashion?

Similarly, before Islam, some of the Berbers of North Africa appeared to have been Jews, or to have at least been Judaized. A semi-historical queen of these Hebraized Berbers, named Al-Kahinah, (or the Kahina), led the resistance against the Arab armies that conquered North Africa in the 680s. Yet some legends of the Kahina claim that she was not a Jew at all. How are we to untangle these contradictions? And how do we square them with the historical rumors of a “Jewish” Berber resistance against Islam?³⁴

Finally, we will turn to a fascinating modern example. In the late 1920s, the Soviet Union created a homeland for its Jews in Birobidzhan, near its border with China in the Soviet Far East. The area was officially known as the Jewish Autonomous Region, or the JAR. The JAR provided a unique and insightful example of another Zion attempted in the modern era. This homeland for Soviet Jews, with Yiddish as its language, was an outgrowth of a nationalistic movement which vied with Zionism in the early twentieth century for the solution to the question of Jewish national aspirations. It was called Diaspora (or Goles) Nationalism, which itself was part of a wider cultural, social, political, and aesthetic movement called Yiddishism.³⁵

The other Zions were downplayed in historical studies and were usually examined from the sidelines of other topics. But these independent Jewish polities were important experiments in creating a “new” Jew and were in many ways no less profound than the movement to create a “new” Jew in Israel when the Jewish state was founded in 1948. The other Zions were radical departures from the political pacifism of Rabbinical Judaism, which eschewed overt forms of political power, and certainly the conquest of territory. In most versions of the coming of Jewish autonomy in Rabbinical Judaism, history would stop with the gathering of Jews in the Holy Land. The very laws of nature would cease working or begin to work anew. But in our examples of other Zions, Jews became established in history, for the benefit of Jews living in this world. In this sense, these Jewish states shared something in common with modern Zionism: they brought a political dimension to Jewish groups. In the process, they created something that was far from normal. They made nations and kingdoms that fell outside the standard purview of Jewish history, at least as it is commonly drawn. They are an area of Jewish studies too long neglected.

THE METHOD

Most of the topics presented here have been debated, and sometimes contentiously. But the fact that Jewish identity may be thrown into crisis by the examination of these kingdoms and states is not a new concern. After all, the creation of Zionism sought to do the same thing. Zionism was in part an effort to create a new Jew—to take a people who in Europe were essentially a class, and mold them into a variegated society. Zionism sought to transform Jewish identity away from domination of a Rabbinical Judaism that stressed political pacifism and regularize and increasingly militarize modern Jews. This essential shift in identity was one of the watershed moments in Jewish history. The nations, states, kingdoms, and tribal confederations examined here performed similar, groundbreaking shifts.

Rather than viewing Judaism narrowly as a religious or even genetic identity that is tied to a particular people of a particular descent in a certain land, these kingdoms created wider, less traditional definitions. And like Zionism, they brought Jews into history. A Jew could be an Ethiopian and exercise the right of political self-determination in his or her own land. A Jew could be a Berber and seek political autonomy in the Atlas Mountains. The shifts in Jewish identity in the examples here are no less radical than the transformation from Rabbinical Jew to secular Israeli. As such, we could say this is a study around the “borderline” of Jewish identity. In many of the examples in this work, there is not even unanimity about whether the people involved were Jews—as if that word itself represents a stable and fixed category during all times and at all places. In fact, who and what is a Jew is a surprisingly fluid category; it has flowed in many different directions in the long history of the people and peoples who have defined themselves as Jews. This work will show that the notion of a Jewish nation lacks the same clarity as the notion of who is a Jew, and this makes for a richer and more nuanced history of Jewish nationalism than has often been imagined.

TWO

SO IF THE KING OF ISRAEL SHOULD COME WITH HIS MEN: THE LOST TRIBES IN HISTORY AND MYTH

THE MYTHICAL OTHER ZION

An early model for a Jewish state outside of the Land of Israel is found in the legendary stories about the Ten “Lost” Tribes of Israel. Nearly all the examples of other Zions found here were initially thought to have originated from the fabled Lost Tribes. The Jews of Ethiopia were, from quite an early date, associated with the lost tribe of Dan. Prominent Spanish Jews also believed that the Khazars were members of the Lost Tribes. Jews believed that the Jewish states they heard about beyond the Land of Israel were members of the Lost Tribes because stories had been told about their lost brethren for hundreds of years. Almost all included the Lost Tribes’ political independence and military might. This abiding legend would resurface again and again, both among Jews and later Christians, and would have a lasting impact on how Jewish autonomy away from the Land of Israel would be conceptualized.

THE BIRTH OF A LEGEND

In 722 BCE, the Assyrian King Sargon II attacked and sacked Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. For the time being, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was spared. The Assyrians had a proven technique for subjugating the lands they conquered: they carried large portions of the population into exile and settled peoples from other lands in their place. This was the fate of Samaria.

So with the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, the powerful myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel was inaugurated. During the next two thousand years, the Lost Tribes would be sought and seemingly found everywhere. From Japan to the Americas, the West used the Lost Tribes to explain

a bewildering world of cultures and ethnicities that defied preexisting categories.

From our current vantage, the whereabouts of the exiled Northern Tribes is not such a mystery at all. There are many indications that a large number of people from the Northern Kingdom of Israel remained in Samaria and its environs, and those survivors are mentioned in two places in the second book of Chronicles. In one, King Hezekiah attempts to convince all Israel to celebrate Passover and sends emissaries throughout the lands, so at the king's command, couriers go throughout Israel and Judah with letters from the king and from his officials, which read: "People of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, that he may return to you who are left, *who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria* (italics mine)."¹

According to this passage, the members of Northern Tribes that "escaped from the hands" of Assyria remained in the Promised Land. The people known as the Samaritans have always claimed ancestry from the Northern Tribes of Israel, and it was just this ancestry that made them suspect to the ancestors of today's Jews; they were viewed as ritually unfit to serve in the Temple, since they had intermarried with the groups that Sargon had settled in Samaria.² The Samaritans and the Jews split off from each other no later than the fourth century BCE. But the existence of the Samaritans was proof enough that the Lost Tribes of Israel were not so lost after all. We also know, from other Biblical sources, that small groups of refugees fled south to the Kingdom of Judah when Samaria was sacked.

Given that it was such a wrenching event, the canonical Jewish scriptures are not overly concerned about the fate of the Lost Tribes. This is perhaps due to the fact that the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE by the Babylonians was of greater concern to the inheritors of the Jewish tradition, who mostly hailed from southern Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was long viewed with suspicion by the south after the division of the United Monarchy. The Northern Kingdom of Israel did not participate in the national cult at the Temple in Jerusalem. They had their own national cultic shrine in Shechem, and their own non-Davidic line of kings, the Omrides. But there are hints, here and there, that the Lost Tribes would play an important role in the future redemption of Israel. Ezekiel 37 reads: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms."³

Also, in Isaiah 11, the time of redemption is associated with gathering up all exiles, including those taken away during the Assyrian destruction: “In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria (italics mine), from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.”⁴

In the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books, or the collection of books not included in the Protestant and Jewish Bible, the story of the Lost Tribes was further fleshed out. The Book of Esdras explains that the tribes, once they had been exiled in Assyria, hatch a plan to make their way to a place beyond the Euphrates River where no humans had ever lived. God favors their plan and stops up the channels of the river to allow them to pass. They travel for a year and a half to a land called Arzareth and remain there until the time God should decide to unblock the channels of the river again, allowing them to return.⁵

From these basic texts, the mythologizing of the Lost Tribes began, and the information they provided became but one element in the developing sense of Jewish messianic expectations. By the lifetime of the Jewish historian Josephus (37–100 CE), the story of the Lost Tribes had been expanded to contain the Sabbath River (in later texts sometimes called the Sambayton). The Sabbath River would have a long and lasting history in tales of the Lost Tribes. In most stories, it was a barrier preventing the Lost Tribes from leaving their kingdom and blocking strangers from entering. Although details would change, in most tales the river remained an impassable obstacle for six days of the week, but on the seventh, like every good Jew, it obeyed the Sabbath and rested.⁶ The Lost Tribes, as Torah-observing Jews, could not travel on the Sabbath, so they were confined to their kingdom. Only when God stopped up the river on one of the other six days would they be set free.

Opinions about the fate of the Lost Tribes differed widely among Jews at different times and places. While Josephus told his readers that the Tribes were alive, well, and numbered a multitude, the famous Rabbi Akiva (40–135 CE) was of the opinion that the Lost Tribes were lost for good. In the Talmud he explained that “. . . the Ten Tribes have no portion in the world to come as the Lord rooted them out of their land in anger and wrath and great indignation. . . .”⁷ Some of the more fanciful elements of the Lost Tribes’ tales are absent or muted in the Talmud. The Sabbath River is only mentioned once in the whole of the Babylonian Talmud.⁸ The Talmud and the Mishnah contain sketchy notions about the Lost Tribes, especially regarding their location and status as Jews. In some places their return is viewed as vital to the redemption of all of Israel, and

in others, their original exile is blamed on their sins. Perhaps it should not surprise us at all that the Talmud, a compendium of Jewish law, should be largely mute about the Lost Tribes. The Talmud is more interested in law than history, so the Tribes come up only as a side issue in the wider context of other matters under discussion.⁹ For the rabbis of the Talmud, if the Lost Tribes did indeed continue to exist, there would be a host of legal issues surrounding them. Would they be considered Jews? Could one eat the food they prepared or marry their women and men? It was largely in such discussions about ritual law and procedures where the Lost Tribes were discussed. But this was only done in a theoretical sense. It seems the rabbis whose discussion and decisions were compiled in both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds had no direct or even indirect information about the descendants of the Lost Tribes.

So while the Bible provides few details about the Lost Tribes, and the Talmud adds little to the debate about their eventual fate, the Apocryphal texts flesh out some details. But it was not until 1847 that significant information was added to the story of the Lost Tribes. In that year, some twenty thousand clay tablets written in Assyrian were discovered. They contained, among a wealth of other information, the records of Sargon's defeat of the Kingdom of Israel and the capture of its residents. The legend about the Samaritans' origins as members of the Northern Tribes seemed to be confirmed in these documents. The number of captives taken was far lower than originally thought, with perhaps about a little more than twenty thousand being sent into exile, and a large portion of the population of Israel remaining and appearing to intermarry with the other ethnicities transplanted to Samaria by the Assyrians.¹⁰ This has been confirmed recently by genetic tests of modern Samaritans.¹¹ Many of the citizens of the Northern Kingdom of Israel fled to the south, which is corroborated in the archaeological record: during the eighth century BCE, rural areas of Judah increased greatly in population, which may be from an influx of refugees from the north. There is also evidence at the same time of the expansion of slums in Jerusalem and Lachish (the second largest city in Judah), which would coincide with an influx of poor northern refugees. The Assyrian documents also occasionally record people with Hebrew names. In one region of Assyria known as Gozan, documents record officials with Hebrew names a hundred years after the exile. An ostracaon (or pottery shard) with Hebrew writing on it from 700 BCE was discovered in Kalkha. On the rolls of Assyrian officials, there are individuals with Hebrew names who rose high in the ranks of the Assyrian state. But after that, there is no evidence that the exiles continued to exist

with any sort of group identity. They probably completely integrated into their new culture and disappeared from the historical record.

THE LITTLE RED JEWS

In the Middle Ages, stories of the Lost Tribes circulated among Jewish travelers and merchants. As Jews in Moslem and Christian lands traveled abroad, they encountered Jews and Jewish communities in unknown lands, including India and parts of Africa, and heard rumors of Jews beyond the well-worn trade routes. This stimulated interest in the Lost Tribes, since most believed these far-flung and exotic Jewish communities were the remnants of the Lost Tribes.

One such traveler was Eldad ha-Dani, who claimed to be a Jew from the tribe of Dan, one of the Lost Northern Tribes. Ha-Dani, who will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, moved about the Jewish world in the ninth century and told tales of the Lost Tribes.¹² He told tales of an independent Jewish kingdom that was not subject to any nation and was ruled by a Jewish monarch. Ha-Dani caused a sensation in the Jewish world. He spoke only Hebrew and used a number of words that were quite unknown to Jews in the West, lending credence to his assertions that he was from one of the Lost Tribes. The written record of his story became one of the sources for the Letters of Prester John, which will be examined later, and which were the next great influence on stories of the Lost Tribes and their fabulous independent kingdoms far beyond settled lands. But before we turn our attention to the Letters of Prester John, we must see how the stories of the tribes were fully fleshed out in folklore and literature after the Bible, Talmud, and Apocrypha were compiled and fixed.

In the Middle Ages, a well-developed literature based on oral sources about the Lost Tribes began to appear among Jews of Europe. After the advent of printing, these tales became extremely popular reading. One story, called "The Little Red Jews on the Other Side of the Sambatyon" contains a blend of tales about the Lost Tribes, culled from different sources.¹³ It relates the journey of one Reb Aaron Halevi, who in 1631 travels by ship from Alexandria to Salonika. He is accompanied by some merchants and asks them their destination. They tell him they are going to Habash (Ethiopia), for they are going to sell iron to the inhabitants "on the farther shore of the river Sambayton."¹⁴ Halevi is intrigued and decides to buy iron and accompany the men to the Sambayton, which is a journey of some eight to twelve months. He begins his journey and relates

a few fanciful events, such as meeting a community of Jews who have “great stores of spices and gold and silver” and eat no meat, but “only tasted fruits and peas, butter, milk and sugar.”¹⁵ Halevi travels through a vast desert before reaching the Sambayton, the tremendous roar of which he hears from a distance. He wishes immediately to go to the shore of the river, but is told it is unwise, as the gentile king of the land had placed great fortifications to guard against attacks by the “little red Jews.”¹⁶ In addition, the massive river hurls up stones so no one can easily cross. He is advised that only during the few hours before the Sabbath begins, the river is tranquil. Halevi is shown houses and fortresses which the fierce little Red Jews destroyed. He secretly rejoices that Jews are capable of destroying gentile forts and cities, but he does not tell this to the gentile inhabitants of the land since they do not know he is a Jew. He then hears a great many details about the realm of the little Red Jews. They have entire mountains of gold. The best varieties of fruit grow there, and they wear garments of silver and gold. They never wear black but only colorful clothing. There are only Jews on the other side of the Sambayton. They are ruled by twenty-four Jewish kings, and each king has a separate kingdom with forts and cities. All the kings are ruled by one supreme king, who is also a great warrior. He does not ride a horse in battle but sits astride a leopard. His retinue includes 150,000 warriors in armor carrying long spears. The supreme king’s name is Eliezer, and during the two hours before the Sabbath begins, he crosses the Sambayton River when its rage subsides and observes the Sabbath on enemy territory. The Little Red Jews allow no strangers in their realm but Muslim iron traders since in all their lands iron cannot be found, and it is needed to make their weapons. All the Little Red Jews are able horsemen and fine warriors. King Eliezer himself is six yards tall (despite being a Little Red Jew), and his sword is three yards long. Eliezer collects a substantial tribute from the peoples who surround him. The Little Red Jews are extremely pious.

Halevi views other exotic wonders, including an ambassador from India who arrives at the Little Red Jews’ court, and as a present gives “a savage who had no head, his eyes and mouth were set in his breast.”¹⁷ It is unclear if Halevi actually ever sets foot in the land of the Little Red Jews. The narrative concludes that he “passed to the mountains of Niskor,”¹⁸ and there live the Bene-Rahab, with the children of Jethro. On the other side of that mountain live the four tribes of Dan, Naphtali, Zebulon, and Asher—all members of the Lost Tribes—and “[t]heir kingdom is vast.”¹⁹ Then he moves to the mountain of Islam where live the Khazars “who are proselytes.”²⁰ Finally, he travels to Habash, where he finds many Jews who are as “black as Ethiopians.”²¹

PRESTER JOHN: THE ENDURING CHRISTIAN LEGEND

Some of the sources for the fanciful tale of the Little Red Jews came from Christian stories. One in particular provided the most enduring well-spring of stories about the Lost Tribes: in the twelfth century, a curious letter began to circulate in Europe. It was purportedly written by Prester John,²² a Christian king who dwelled in the East and ruled a large and wealthy kingdom. Stories about Prester John had circulated well before the letter's appearance, and rumors of a Christian kingdom to the east of the Islamic caliphate may have had some connection to historical reality. From very early times Christians who were declared heretical by the Church fled east, away from areas of Church control. For example, one such group, the Nestorian Christians, declared heretics in the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, made their way to Asia and eventually reached China. A Nestorian monument, called the Nestorian Stone of Xi'an, written in 781 CE in both Chinese and Aramaic, celebrates the arrival of Christianity in China in 635 CE. The Nestorians were successful in China, but generally the movement began to decay in the 1300s. Yet when Jesuit missionaries began to travel to China in the seventeenth century, they could still find traces of Nestorian Christianity.

The memory of these Asian Christians helped fuel the Western imagination about Prester John. Another contributing element was the early Church tradition that missions sent the apostles to far-flung Eastern locales. In one part of the tradition, the Apostle Thomas was sent to India to preach the Gospel. In the Middle Ages, the word "India" was a blanket term for the East, used in many sources to describe a vast range of territory that would include, in today's geographical terms, most of East Africa, the Middle East including Arabia, India proper, China, and the Far East. Before the Crusades (starting in 1095 CE) and certainly before the so-called Age of Exploration beginning in the early fifteenth century, Westerners lacked a precise geographical sense of the lands that lie to the east and south of Europe, so a term like "India" could easily be applied to places as far away and diverse as Ethiopia and China.

Saint Thomas became the Apostle of the East, and it was thought that he converted large numbers of "Indians" to the Christian faith, including grand and powerful monarchs. An early apocryphal gospel, the *Acts of Thomas*, written in the early third century, supported the claim of Thomas as missionary to India.²³

When a letter from Prester John, the mysterious Christian potentate, began to circulate in Europe, Europeans were generally receptive to its veracity. The Prester John stories also had an appealing element of wish

fulfillment. During this time the Latin states of Western Europe had established several kingdoms in the Holy Land after wresting them from the Muslims in the Crusades; these fragile enclaves were besieged by Muslim forces on all sides. The idea of a powerful Christian monarch to the east of Islam was an attractive hope to Crusader Europe. Prester John's armies to the east could attack Islam at any time and relieve pressure on the Crusader states, if not topple the Muslim caliphate itself.²⁴

The first version of Prester John's letter was written to Manuel, the governor (emperor) of Byzantium, and is first mentioned in a French chronicle in 1165 CE. The letter itself is a compendium of fable and myth, and displays for the reader the expected wonders of the Orient. Prester John rules a vast empire, and seventy-two kings pay him tribute. There are elephants and camels in abundance, and milk and honey flow everywhere. The kingdom is immensely wealthy. Gold, silver, and precious stones exist in large quantity, and the realm has many subjects—all of whom are disease free.²⁵ There is no crime or social discord; there are no poor or adulterers. Prester John's army is mighty, and when he rides into war, his troops are preceded by thirteen massive crosses studded with gold and precious stones. He has ten thousand mounted soldiers and one hundred thousand infantry men. In the letter, Prester John's kingdom is a veritable Christian utopia. Everything that the West failed to achieve, Prester John's kingdom brought to fruition; the letter fulfilled Christian fantasies about a great Christian power to the east of Islam, and also satisfied the time-proven human desire to project fantasies of perfection and virtue onto a fabricated realm.

Most important was a mention in the letter of a “waterless river of stones,” which flows through the land of Prester John into a sandy sea without water. Three days a week the river flows with stones, and when they reach the sea, the stones vanish. While the river is moving, it is impossible to cross. Between this sandy sea and some mountains there is a desert, and beyond that, a river of precious stones. Further still from this river are “ten tribes of Jews,”²⁶ who pretend to have their own kings but are “nevertheless our [Prester John's] servants and tributaries.”²⁷

This brief reference to “ten tribes of Jews” in Prester John's letter was an expression of Medieval European fears. Although the Muslim threat was more real than imagined, there was also widespread concern that the Lost Tribes of Israel continued to exist, had an independent kingdom and large army, and would one day swoop down to destroy Christendom. The letter of Prester John assuaged such fears. Although these Jews thought they were independent, they were under Prester John's mighty suzerainty.

Later versions of Prester John's letter featured more fantastic interpolations involving centaurs and Amazon kingdoms. The Lost Tribes of Israel theme also received a healthy expansion. In the original letter, there were only ten tribes of Jews, and no mention was made of the fabled Lost Tribes; they simply lived adjacent to a river of stones and paid a tribute to Prester John for their titular independence. In a fourteenth-century version of the letter, the scenario is more fleshed out. The river of stones is described as a barrier between Prester John's kingdom and that of the Jews, and the river is said to stand still only on the Sabbath. Even though the Jews are unlikely to attack on the Sabbath, Prester John fortifies the banks of the river, erecting forty-two castles, six thousand crossbowmen, fifteen thousand archers, and forty thousand troops, "[so] if the King of Israel would come with his men, he could not get across with his Jews, who are twice as numerous as the Christians. . . ."²⁸ For the "great King of Israel"²⁹ has under him three hundred kings and four thousand princes, dukes, and counts, all of them loyal Jews to the King. If the Jews cross the river "all the Christians and Saracens would be lost."³⁰ However, every Saturday a few thousand Jews are allowed to enter Prester John's kingdom to engage in trade (where they are kept under close scrutiny, for they are not trusted). Here, Christian fears of Jewish power were explored and then countered: Christendom had nothing to fear from the fearsome Lost Tribes. Prester John had it under control. And just to add to the ambivalence of this version of the letter, the reader is informed that Jewish women are "the most beautiful and passionate in the world." Jewish men were to be feared, while Jewish women were objects of male lust and fantasy.³¹

The letter of Prester John was immensely popular. It circulated in manuscript form, in numerous versions, and in a multitude of languages. When printing was invented, it was published in small chapbooks, or inexpensive, cheaply printed books meant for mass markets. As the Middle Ages came to a close, and Europeans began to explore and exploit the wider world, they looked for Prester John everywhere. When the Portuguese began their explorations of Africa in the fifteenth century, they fully expected to stumble on Prester John's kingdom. Natives along the coast told stories of a powerful king who ruled from inland and did not show his face but sat behind a curtain. This great king had to approve the succession of kings and leaders on the coast. This fueled the interest of the Portuguese. They finally decided that Prester John could dwell in no other place than Ethiopia, for it was well known that a Christian monarch ruled that nation. Stories also circulated that in the mountains and highlands in the inland of Ethiopia there was an independent Jewish

kingdom, and that the Ethiopian Christian monarch and the Jewish king waged periodic, fierce wars. As we will see in the next chapter, Ethiopia was a fine candidate for Prester John's empire. But when Europeans' familiarity with the country improved, the match seemed less apt, and explorers and conquerors in the Americas looked for the elusive Prester John in the rain forests of Meso-America and searched for the Lost Tribes among the "Red Indians."³²

Hebrew translations of Prester John's letter were made, which were read by Jews with keen interest. Of course, they were less interested in the fabled Christian monarch than they were in the kingdom of Jews beyond his territory. As we will see in the next chapter, beginning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries wars between the Beta Israel, or the Jews of Ethiopia, and successive Christian monarchs brought Ethiopian slaves into Middle Eastern and European markets well into the fifteenth century. Some "black" Jews sold on that market told tales of their wars, and this added fuel to stories about Prester John and the independent Jews of his kingdom, who were imagined to be none other than the Lost Tribes.

Prominent rabbis and scholars discussed the Jewish kingdom in distant Ethiopia in letters and *responsa*. In 1488 CE, the famous commentator on the Mishnah, Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro, wrote a letter from Jerusalem explaining the situation in Prester John's kingdom. There had been a great battle between the Jews and Christians, and Prester John "... nearly exterminated them [the Jews] and the small remainder was subjected by him to great vexations . . . But, with, God's mercy, other kings arose in India [and here the wide sense of India is being used], less cruel than their predecessors, and the *Bene Israel* were able to lift up their heads, and increased in number. They still pay tribute to Prester John, but are not subject to persecutions."³³

Rabbi Obadiah continues to explain that some forty years ago some of the Ethiopian Jews were brought as prisoners to be sold in Egypt. He saw them, and they were as dark as Cushites (Ethiopians). Obadiah explains that the captives had been from the tribe of Dan. This identification would prove important to the Jews of Ethiopia, for when the Beta Israel were declared Jews by rabbinical authorities in the State of Israel, paving the way for their eventual immigration to the Jewish state, one of the precedents cited was the rulings and observations of Obadiah of Bertinoro.³⁴

The well-known Kabbalist Abraham Levi the Elder wrote a letter from Jerusalem in 1528 CE concerning the Lost Tribes, and used terms and descriptions that were similar to the political and military situation of the Jews of Ethiopia at the time. He wrote "Falasa is a strong kingdom of Jews, who are valiant and dwell in tents. . . . Their land is large, and situ-

ated in high mountains, so that no one dares go to war with them.”³⁵ As we will see in the next chapter, Falasha was a pejorative name for the Jews of Ethiopia. Here Abraham Levi confuses the group name with a place name. We will also see how the Beta Israel used mountain strongholds to fight the Christian monarchs of Ethiopia.³⁶ Again, the date 1528 CE corresponds roughly to a period of intense warfare between the Beta Israel and the Christian Ethiopian royal house.

These letters are intriguing, for in them we can see important Jewish scholars of the day wrestling with the idea of a Jewish polity in the land of Prester John. There is certainly a great deal of fable and legend in the letters, mostly fashioned or refashioned from the accounts given by Eldad ha-Dani some four hundred years earlier and given a new expression in the Prester John legend. It is important to realize that while Obadiah of Bertinoro and Abraham Levi were quite interested in the Jews of Prester John’s lands, they were not surprised by their existence, or by the fact that they had an independent kingdom.

THE LOST TRIBES ON THE WORLD STAGE

During the Middle Ages, Jews were a minority group in Christendom and the lands of Islam. Their rights and treatment varied with place and time, but overall Jews were not afforded the same rights as Christians and Muslims. Tales of the Lost Tribes and their fabulously wealthy homeland teeming with food and riches and their vast armies, political independence and might, had an obvious and powerfully attractive pull for Jews. Tales of the Lost Tribes and their kingdom became a running motif in medieval Jewish life and gained intensity during times of persecution. Stories of the Lost Tribes and their kingdoms were mixed with end-of-the-world expectations. The ingathering of all Jews by the Messiah was a dominant theme in Jewish messianic expectations, and the Messiah’s role as a military leader at the head of a large army of the Lost Northern Tribes was a common expectation. In important ways, the stories of powerful Jewish kingdoms outside the realm of the known world were also a way for Jews to play imaginatively with the idea of Jewish political independence, far away from the Land of Israel. The Lost Tribes were sought and “found” in every conceivable corner of the medieval world, and the veracity of those finds was questioned by very few religious scholars, either Christian or Jewish. For Christians, the Lost Tribes were ambivalently viewed: in some quarters they were feared as potential destroyers of Christendom. As we saw, one popular fable told and retold in the Middle Ages, particularly

in German lands, was of the Red Jews, a fearsome tribe of Lost Jews who, if not for their confinement in a mountainous region to the east, would bring about the end of the world. For Jews, on the other hand, the Lost Tribes played a significant role in their messianic expectations. Few versions of the redemption of the Jews failed to involve the Lost Tribes.

In reality, most of the Lost Tribes in exile simply became assimilated. The Northern Tribes were viewed, by both Christians and Jews alike, through an anachronistic lens; they were not Jews in the Rabbinical sense of the word. Like many ancient peoples, they simply disappeared from history with little trace. They either intermarried with the Southern tribes or continued to exist as Samaritans. But because of their connection to later forms of Judaism, and their memory preserved in the sacred writings of that religion, they played a role in Christianity and Judaism. Most importantly for this discussion, they were a powerful template for Jewish fantasies about political power outside the boundaries of Zion. The Lost Tribes gave the other Zions a firm grounding in legendary history and historical expectation.

THE PERSISTENT MEMORY OF ISRAEL

Both Jews and Christians had powerful mythical memories of the Lost Tribes of Israel. The exile and assimilation of most of a people, which are somewhat commonplace historical events, became an enduring legend for Jews and Christians. Searching for traces of the Lost Tribes continues to be a preoccupation today, producing scholarly and pseudo-scholarly works by the score.³⁷ For the study of other Jewish polities in the Middle Ages, examining the legends of the Lost Tribes is crucial. Specifically, as we shall see, the Khazar Kingdom and the Beta Israel of Ethiopia were peoples whose exotic homelands and political autonomy made them suitable medieval candidates for the long-lost brethren of Jews in Muslim and Christian lands.

THREE

KING SOLOMON LOVED MANY STRANGE WOMEN: THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF ETHIOPIA

OPERATION MOSES

In 1984 Ethiopia was in the grip of a massive famine. A major drought was affecting much of the northern part of the country, whose economy was nearly 90 percent agricultural. This, combined with years of civil war and social disruption, triggered a major crisis. The Ethiopian government was overwhelmed by the scope of the famine and drought, which affected nearly eight million people—and probably more than a million of these people eventually died.¹ Thousands of refugees set out on foot for relief stations, many in neighboring Sudan. One affected group of people was called the Beta Israel, or the Ethiopian Jews, also called the “Falasha” by Christian and Muslim Ethiopians. Eventually some eight thousand Beta Israel languished in camps in Sudan. It is estimated that over two thousand Beta Israel died during the trek.

On November 21, 1984, the Israeli Defense Forces, with the aid of the CIA, the United States Embassy in Khartoum, and the Sudanese military initiated Operation Moses: the airlift of all Beta Israel in Sudanese refugee camps. By the time the airlift was over in January of 1985, nearly all Beta Israel who had made it to Sudan were in the State of Israel. Later a mop-up exercise rescued the remaining members of the group from Sudan.² Then, after a protracted political stalemate with the Ethiopian government, Operation Solomon was begun in 1991 to remove the remainder of the Jews from Ethiopia itself. In a breakneck thirty-six hours, thirty-four El Al C-130s filled to absolute capacity carried more than fourteen thousand Beta Israel to the State of Israel.³

With these two airlifts, a curious, and for many in the West, unknown Jewish world was suddenly in the news: “black” Jews in Ethiopia were arriving in Zion under Israel’s Law of Return. But who were these mysterious people? Israeli immigration officials had known of their existence

for many years, and certain Jewish relief agencies had worked among them since at least the turn of the twentieth century. Yet this exotic corner of the Jewish experience was completely unknown to most people. The Beta Israel were poor and settled in small villages in the central Ethiopian highlands; most lived without running water, bathrooms, or electricity. But the abject contemporary circumstances of the Beta Israel told only part of their long story. This Jewish group, for a sizable portion of its history, had maintained independent territories. Beta Israel leaders from important families had control over their fiefdoms as princes. Then the Jews of Ethiopia were sought as mercenaries by the Emperors of Ethiopia after they were defeated in key battles in the late seventeenth century. The other Zion developed by the Beta Israel is intimately attached to the unique history of Ethiopia, a land with deep roots in the Jewish and Christian religious cultures.

THE NEW ZION

Ethiopia seems always to have been a land of mystery. Ethiopia was just outside the boundary of the Western ancient world, but was close enough to Europe to be known from written accounts by travelers and geographers or through popular stories and legends. It was just far enough away to kindle the imagination and certainly enough was unknown about Ethiopia to stimulate the speculation of Westerners. Ethiopia became for the West an early repository of fantasy and legend. It was also the West's farthest parameter, so Greek influences permeated Ethiopia in Greco-Roman times. The Greek language was known in Ethiopia. The royal house of the Axumite Kingdom, which began its reign in the fourth century BCE, was familiar with the language and even used Greek titles of royal honor. In the fourth century CE, Ethiopia was one of the first countries in Africa outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire to embrace Christianity. But even before that, there appeared to be a Jewish presence in the country from very ancient times.

Today, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church uses a translation of the Bible in Ge'ez, which is a Semitic language related to Hebrew. This translation is based on the Septuagint, or the Greek translation of the Bible made by the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, between the beginning of the third to the first centuries BCE. This version of the Bible was later adopted by Greek-speaking Christians as their canonical translation. That the Christians of Ethiopia should also have used this translation is not altogether surprising. The connections between the Egyptian Orthodox Church and

the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were old and close. However the Ge'ez translation was not always a faithful rendering of the Greek, for a great many Hebrew and Aramaic loan words entered the translation. The loan words and borrowings suggest an ancient Jewish presence in the country, probably sometime before the conversion of the royal Axumite house to Christianity in 325 CE.⁴

Then with the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Ethiopia was put under pressure by the Islamic states to the north, west, and east, and across the Red Sea in Yemen and Arabia. Thus, the third Abrahamic faith arrived in Ethiopia, either from forcible conversions through war or through the gradual infiltration of Muslims through settlement. But a large number of tribes in Ethiopia also practiced various indigenous religions or indigenous religions mixed in some sense with Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, which only added to the religious complexity of Ethiopia.⁵ Ethiopia's roots in the three Abrahamic faiths run deep.

As it developed, the Ethiopian Church retained, or adopted, a large number of specifically Jewish practices. Ethiopian Christians obeyed a version of the food purity laws found in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the rules concerning the ritual impurity of women during menstruation and following childbirth.⁶ As in many African cultures, male circumcision was practiced, but in Ethiopia it was often performed on the eighth day after birth, according to the Biblical dictum. Ethiopian churches still contain a threefold division of their interior space, in conscious imitation of the Temple in Jerusalem,⁷ and a *tabot*, or a replica of the Ark of the Covenant is found in all Ethiopian Churches.⁸ But many post-Biblical innovations practiced by Rabbinical Jews were not adopted by the Christian Ethiopians. For example, in Deuteronomy 14:21 and Exodus 23:19, the Bible contains the prohibition of seething a kid in its mother's milk. In the Rabbinical tradition, this was transformed into a law against eating milk or milk products and meat at the same time. Ethiopian Christians never adopted this tradition.⁹

So what kind of Judaism influenced Ethiopian Christianity? The status of Judaism in Ethiopia before the arrival of Christianity is partly hypothetical because of the lack of necessary historical documents, but also because, to a real extent, Judaism had not coalesced into the religion we know today. What was "Judaism" like in the first, second, or third century in Ethiopia? Did it resemble the emerging doctrines of the Pharisees found in the New Testament?¹⁰ Did it resemble the Hellenistic Judaism we see in the works of the first-century Greek-speaking Jewish Biblical commentator Philo of Alexandria?¹¹ Did it resemble the Judaism of the Essenes who lived in first-century Palestine and segregated themselves

from other Jewish groups?¹² Was it closer to the Jewish-Christianity we see in some of Paul's letters and Acts of the Apostles and mentioned in the work of the Church historian Eusebius in his *History of the Church*?¹³

Many of these questions will be clarified as we examine the history of Judaism in Ethiopia. The problem of the Jewish identity of the Ethiopian Jews, who called themselves the Beta Israel, or the House of Israel, illustrates the difficulties at the heart of defining Jewishness. The political autonomy of the Jews of Ethiopia, while in a certain sense not in doubt for some part of their history, is also debated. But before we get into these topics, we will first explore some of the mythological background of the Jewish presence in this fascinating land.

FOR HE IS THE ANOINTED OF GOD: KING SOLOMON AND ETHIOPIA

Any examination of the Jews of Ethiopia must begin with King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba. This short tale is found in the first Book of Kings, 10:1–10:¹⁴

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.” And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.¹⁵

On one level, this story is a chance to display King Solomon’s wisdom and sagacity. But the tale may also be cautionary. In the chapter following this tale, the Bible says “King Solomon loved many strange (or foreign)

women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites.”¹⁶ These wives led him astray from the God of Israel and “Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites,”¹⁷ and built places of worship for his wives and their gods and goddesses. The conjunction of the two stories is probably less than accidental. Solomon’s proclivity for strange women, the appearance of the Queen of Sheba, her departure, and Solomon’s activities with his multitude of foreign wives lends, by proximity, an atmosphere of sexuality to the Queen of Sheba.

The Ethiopians adopted the story of the Queen of Sheba. Although most scholars believe the Queen of Sheba came from southern Arabia, several foundational myths surrounding her were told in Ethiopia. Her story was recounted in the *Kebra Nagast*, or the Chronicles of the Kings (of Ethiopia), compiled sometime after 1270 CE. The *Kebra Nagast* covers a long time period, beginning with the story of Adam and ending with the fulfillment of God’s promise to humanity through the messianic mission of Ethiopia’s kings. The *Kebra Nagast* had several layers of compositional history; it incorporated material of a decidedly Judaic character with Christian components and courtly anecdotes about Ethiopia’s early kings. The *Kebra Nagast* rivaled the Old and New Testaments in Ethiopian culture; it became the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feeling.¹⁸ The *Kebra Nagast* probably represents a work that was culled from a great many oral and written sources, of both Jewish and Christian provenance, from both canonical and noncanonical Christian and Jewish works.¹⁹

The *Kebra Nagast* explains the foundation of the first royal house in Ethiopia: the so-called Solomonic Kings, who lived in the capital city of Axum. According to this account, the Queen of Sheba was an Ethiopian monarch who went to Israel because of Solomon’s great erudition and wealth. She is depicted as the perfect ruler, who is “very beautiful in face, and her stature was superb, and her understanding and intelligence, which God had given her, were of such high character that she went to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon.”²⁰ She was also a pagan who worshiped the sun.²¹

Solomon is depicted as being the greatest ruler of his day, when “[h]e opened his mouth in parables . . . his words were sweeter than honey.”²² He is richer than any monarch in the world, for “. . . in the days of Solomon the King’s gold was as common as bronze, and silver as lead, and bronze and lead were as abundant as the grass of the fields and the reeds of the desert.”²³

The queen asks Solomon several riddles, which he answers, and she is impressed by his knowledge. They hold frequent concourse, and “[t]he Queen used to go to [Solomon] and return continually, and harken to his wisdom, and keep it in her heart.”²⁴ The king, in turn, visits her, and when six months have elapsed, she wishes to return to Ethiopia. Solomon then ponders in his heart and says, “A woman of such splendid beauty hath come to me from the ends of the earth! What do I know?”²⁵ The *Kebra Nagast* then paraphrases the Book of Kings, stating that Solomon is a lover of women.

Solomon then devises a stratagem to trick the virgin queen into his bed. He serves a meal laden with heavy spices and then invites the Queen into his bedroom for the night. The Queen of Sheba makes Solomon swear he would not have sex with her by force. He swears, but only after making her swear that while remaining in his bedroom, she will take nothing at all in his house. Solomon then instructs one of his servants to fill a vessel of water next to the Queen’s bed. The Queen sleeps a little and then is awoken by a great thirst. Solomon feigns sleep, and when the Queen of Sheba awakes, she reaches out for the water to quench her thirst. Solomon seizes her hand and asks her why she has broken their oath. After some verbal wrangling, the Queen agrees to have sex with Solomon, having broken her vow.²⁶

That night Solomon has a powerful dream: the sun comes down from heaven and rests on Israel. And then, after a while, it removes itself and flies away to Ethiopia, where it remains. The image is an apt one, since we are earlier told that the Queen of Sheba worships the sun.²⁷ The Queen of Sheba returns to Ethiopia, and the result of her union with Solomon is a son named Menelik.²⁸

When Menelik becomes a man, he grows interested in his father and travels to Israel to meet him. Solomon showers him with gifts, and he is given twelve Jewish advisors and priests to take back to Ethiopia, evoking the traditional number of tribes of Israel. The night before he returns, Menelik, in secret agreement with the priests, steals the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple. He transfers it to Ethiopia, effectively rendering Ethiopia the new Zion, and Ethiopians the new Israelites. In fact, the ark in the *Kebra Nagast* takes on the persona of Zion. The ark is lovingly called “our Lady Zion”²⁹ and is viewed as the physical resting place of God’s presence on the earth.³⁰

The meeting of Sheba and Solomon, her seduction, the birth of Menelik, and his securing of the Ark was a favorite motif in the art and literature of Ethiopia. Its message was simple: the patrimony of Israel had passed to Ethiopia. And not only that: the office of the divine kingship had passed

from Israel to Ethiopia. The Solomonic kings in Ethiopia would continually derive the justification for their power from this potent national myth, bolstered by such statements in the *Kebra Nagast* as ". . . it is not seemly to revile the king, for he is the anointed of God."³¹ And: "It is not a good thing for any of those under the domination of a king to revile him, for retribution belongeth to God."³²

There were deep roots for this Judaic legend in Ethiopian culture. A folk legend held that before the adoption of Christianity in the third century, over half of Ethiopia was "Jewish." The ties between Judaism and Ethiopia were acknowledged by most scholars, although the scale and degree were debated. Certainly, writers in antiquity were at least aware that there were Jews in Ethiopia. In the famous story in Acts of the Apostles, Philip converts the Ethiopian eunuch, and although the man is not specifically identified as a Jew, he had gone up to Jerusalem to worship, and was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah.³³

During the Middle Ages, stories of a Jewish presence in Ethiopia circulated, bolstered mainly by famous travel narratives. The first to receive widespread attention was from a man named Eldad ha-Dani. He was a Jew who lived in the ninth century and claimed he was from the tribe of Dan,³⁴ one of the Lost Tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. In ha-Dani's book, the *Sefer Eldad*, he claimed that the Lost Tribes of Dan, Naphthali, Gad, Asher, and the sons of Moses lived beyond the rivers of Cush, or Ethiopia. While ha-Dani nowhere equated the Jews of Ethiopia with the tribe of Dan, his Danite origins and knowledge of Ethiopia established the inference, and thereafter the Jews of Ethiopia were associated with the tribe of Dan.

Eldad ha-Dani's tale reads like many medieval travel journals. He provides an account and tally of the Lost Tribes, who in his narrative resemble wandering bands of nomads. He relates a journey he took with another Jew from the tribe of Asher (another Lost Tribe) which ends in a terrible shipwreck. Eldad and the Asherite cling to planks until they drift to a land called Romaranus, where the people are "black Cushites of tall stature, without clothes and without raiment; for they are like animals, and eat men."³⁵ These Cushites quickly eat the plump Asherite, while the thinner Eldad is given rich food to fatten him. Eldad, however, successfully hides his food, and then the Lord intervenes and saves him. A large army captures the Cushites, plunders their goods, and takes Eldad as a slave. These fire-worshippers, who would "bow and prostrate themselves" to a great fire each day, after four years bring him to the city of Azin; there, a Jewish merchant of the tribe of Issachar (yet another Lost Tribe) buys him for some gold. Once Eldad is passed on to the tribe of Issachar, he finds other

members of the Lost Tribes. The Issacharites live in peace and prosperity, have no recourse to war or weapons, and have only knives to slaughter animals. They have no social vices, and “even if they find fine garments or money on the road they do not stretch forth their hands to take them.”³⁶ The tribes of Zebulun inhabit the mountains of Paran and live on the border of Issachar. They make tents of “hairy skins,”³⁷ and they travel as far as the Euphrates River to engage in trade. The tribe of Reuben dwell opposite them, behind Mount Para. They live in peace with the Zebulunites and go out “together to battle and attack wayfarers and they divide the booty among them.”³⁸ Zebulun has the Bible, the Mishnah, the Talmud, and the Haggadah, and they spend every Sabbath expounding the Law in Hebrew. The tribe of Ephraim and Manasseh live in the mountain of Nejd, near the city of Mecca, and the tribe of Simeon is found in the land of the Chaldeans. Together they are more numerous than all the other tribes combined and collect a tribute from twenty-five kingdoms; even some Ishmaelites (Muslims) pay them tribute.³⁹

The first truly historical reference to the Jews of Ethiopia and their connection to the tribe of Dan is found in a letter by the noted authority on the Mishnah, Obadiah of Bertinoro in 1488 CE. Obadiah claimed that Jews lived in the lands of Prester John, and they belonged to the tribe of Dan. Later in the sixteenth century, David Ben Abi Zimra, a noted Kabalist and Talmudic scholar, known in Jewish tradition by the acronym the Radbaz, confirmed the Jewish identity of the Jews of Ethiopia and also acknowledged that they were the tribe of Dan. Such was the stature of the Radbaz that when the Jews of Ethiopia were permitted to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return in 1973 CE, the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Ovadiah Yosef, cited the Radbaz to support his decision.

Other travelers in the Middle Ages also reported that Jews lived in Ethiopia. Benjamin of Tudela from northern Spain, a famous Jewish traveler in the late twelfth century, journeyed across Europe and India and maybe even China and returned through Southern Arabia. He took the Nile Valley north to Alexandria and then across the Mediterranean to Rome. As is typical with medieval travel accounts, it proves difficult to pin down the exact location of the place names that Benjamin used. But generations of readers have associated the Jews of Ethiopia with one passage, where he describes “Middle India”: “In it are great mountains; there are Jews who are not subject to the rule of others, and they have towns and fortresses on the tops of mountains. They descend to the land of Ha-Ma’atom, which is called Nubia. This is a Christian kingdom, and its people are called Nubians. The Jews wage war on them and loot and plunder, and then return to the mountains. No one is able to defeat them.”⁴⁰

A remarkable amount of myth and legend circulated about Ethiopian Jews during the European Middle Ages. But despite their volume, scholars have justly been wary of using these sources to reconstruct the history of Judaism in Ethiopia, for in fact, there is remarkably little in the way of historical documentation about a Jewish presence in Ethiopia from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries. Few doubt that Jews or groups who practiced Jewish customs lived in the country, but reliable historical sources are frustratingly silent regarding them.

THE JEWISH CONTEXT: THE GREAT SCATTERING

Until recently, any examination of Jews in Ethiopia was confined to Diaspora studies: the Jews of Ethiopia were viewed as a group or groups of Jews who could best be understood against the background of the Jewish dispersion(s). The beginning of modern Western knowledge of the Jews of Ethiopia can be traced to James Bruce (1730-1789 CE), a Scotsman who traveled in Ethiopia and wrote a popular account of his trip, which included his encounters with the Ethiopian Jews. His work spurred modern interest in the subject. The form of Judaism practiced in Ethiopia was brought to the attention of Westerners in a more overt way by Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As reports of these Jews reached the West, scholars scrambled to explain their origins and practices. They were called the Falashas by non-Jewish Ethiopians, and Beta Israel, or House of Israel, by the group themselves. Their “primitive” Judaism was noted: they practiced animal sacrifice, they lacked the Talmud, and they did not observe historically late Jewish holidays like Chanukah. The Beta Israel had no knowledge of Hebrew, and there is little evidence that they had ever known the language. Their literature consisted of the Torah in *Ge'ez*, which is the religious language of Ethiopia, and some other books which also belong to the canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Early on their pejorative name—Falashas—was translated as “immigrants,” supporting the theory that these Jews had come into Ethiopia from a foreign land and through many centuries had become acclimatized to Ethiopian languages and customs.

Since the Beta Israel were physically and linguistically indistinguishable from their Ethiopian Christian, Muslim, and pagan neighbors, it was widely believed that their ancestors came from a closely neighboring land, and while taking Ethiopian wives and customs, never fully gave up their Jewish identity. Their sense of separateness remained and was reinforced by derogatory and exclusionary Christian attitudes, and the

Beta Israel fostered this by practicing ritual seclusion. They viewed contact with non-Beta Israel as polluting and even in towns where the Beta Israel dwelled in close proximity to their Christian neighbors, the Beta Israel lived in separate quarters. Part of their exclusion was also accomplished by geography. The Jews of Ethiopia lived in remote regions of the country's interior highlands, near Lake Tana. The area around Lake Tana had been associated with "Jewish" practices for several centuries by the time European travelers and missionaries arrived in the nineteenth century. Another level of exclusion was maintained by one of the traditional Beta Israel trades. In premodern Ethiopia, blacksmiths and metal workers were thought to possess malevolent, magical powers. The Beta Israel were viewed by Ethiopian gentiles as attracting the evil eye, so although their skills as metal workers were prized, they were also greatly feared.

Beta Israel practices differed considerably from other Jewish groups. The Beta Israel obeyed strict purity laws. In the "normative" Jewish tradition, women were considered unclean during menstruation, and for seven days afterward, the *niddah* was in effect, when a woman kept herself sexually separated from her husband. Only after the conclusion of the seven-day period, when she had visited the *mikvah*, or ritual bath, was she considered pure and able to engage in intercourse. The Beta Israel expanded this practice: women were segregated into huts on the outskirts of Beta Israel villages during menstruation and for the seven days that followed. Also, unlike other Jewish groups in medieval and modern times, the Beta Israel practiced monasticism. But communities of Beta Israel monks lived both with the general population and in cloisters. Beta Israel monks were often political as well as religious leaders—an anomaly that has been explained in different ways, though none are entirely satisfactory.⁴¹

By and large, scholars explained the origins of the Beta Israel in Jewish terms, even if many of their customs and practices fit nowhere into the Judaism that emerged among Rabbinic Jews or Jews who had access to the literature of Rabbinical Judaism, like the Talmud. So how did this unique community come about?

As we said, "Falasha," the derogatory term for the Beta Israel, was translated as "immigrant." Investigators considered the Beta Israel as descended from Jewish immigrants outside of Ethiopia and sought their geographical origin in various lands. Just north of Ethiopia, an ancient Jewish community existed on the island of Elephantine, in a cataract of the Nile River on the border of Nubia. A large cache of letters in various languages was discovered there in the nineteenth century, revealing the existence of this community. Some were in Aramaic and detailed the

lives and business practices of the Jewish military garrison stationed on the island from about 499–399 BCE. These Jews appeared to have worshiped Yahweh and other gods and goddesses and had a temple where they performed animal sacrifice.⁴² Perhaps it was the connection with animal sacrifice coupled with some legends and oral traditions among the Jews of Ethiopia about an Egyptian origin of their community that led scholars to seek the source of the Jews of Ethiopia in the community from Elephantine.

The problem with the Elephantine hypothesis is the total lack of historical corroboration. There are no sources which document the ultimate fate of the Jews of Elephantine, and without a new archaeological or document discovery, an Ethiopian settlement for them can never be anything but pure speculation.

Another possible source of the origin of the community can be found in the Jews of Yemen. Yemen is a short boat ride across the Red Sea from Ethiopia, and commerce, trade, and settlement between the two lands was longstanding and nearly continual. As we will see in chapter 5,⁴³ Yemen had a well-established Jewish community since antiquity. That Jews could have crossed from Yemen and settled in Ethiopia seems geographically feasible. The main problem with this hypothesis is that the Jews of Yemen appear to have always had a firm connection to Hebrew and Aramaic. They practiced nonbiblical holidays like Chanukah and usually had access to the Talmud and most Rabbinical literature. But just as with the community in Elephantine, the Yemeni origin of the Jews of Ethiopia is largely based on proximity and shy of a new discovery there is no historical proof that the Beta Israel had their origins in Yemen.

So Diaspora researchers were left with many curious anomalies, the most outstanding of which was that this Jewish group practiced a “primitive” Judaism based on Hebrew Bible traditions seemingly without the influence of Rabbinical Judaism. This led many to conclude that the Beta Israel represented some form of ancient Judaism that was untouched by later developments in the formation of the religion. The origins of the Beta Israel may never be known with certainty, but their ancient lineage was not questioned.

The immigrant theory of Beta Israel origins was given a further boost in modern times because of the increasingly imperiled circumstances of the community. As social, economic, and political circumstances in Ethiopia declined in the nineteenth century, the Beta Israel were at risk from war, famine, and the proselytizing zeal of foreign and Ethiopian Christian missionaries. But after a long period of relative neglect, the Jewish world began to turn their attention to the Ethiopian Jews. Several Jewish explorers

traveled to the Lake Tana region of Ethiopia to survey their plight,⁴⁴ and from these expeditions, the Ethiopian Jews were gradually and irrevocably pulled into the orbit of world Jewry. This culminated in the 1973 ruling of the chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel that the Beta Israel were genuine Jews, descended from the tribe of Dan. As already outlined, in 1984, 1985, and 1991, most of the Jews of Ethiopia were airlifted to Israel, where they settled under the Law of Return. With the exception of a few groups (most notably the Falash Mura, who were forced to convert to Christianity in the nineteenth century),⁴⁵ nearly all Ethiopian Jews now live in Israel.

THE ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT: A NEW ZION

Recently, scholarly work on the Beta Israel has increasingly turned to the Ethiopian context of the Jewish experience as researchers have realized that the Ethiopian Jews were fundamentally different from other Jewish Diaspora groups. For one, they did not have a literature in Hebrew and Aramaic. That in itself is not extremely problematic, for we know of Jewish groups who used translated scriptures and still maintained a Jewish group identity. For example, in Greco-Roman times (roughly from the eighth century BCE to fifth century CE), Hellenized Jews employed Greek to translate the Torah and other sacred books and probably had a liturgy in Greek as well. But important differences separated the Beta Israel from Hellenized Jews. The Beta Israel, for one, relied on Christian translations of the Bible for their works. In many cases there are few variations between the Christian and the Beta Israel version of a sacred text. Often, individual Beta Israel would hire Christian scribes to provide copies of a work. References to Jesus and the Virgin Mary were removed but often without great care. Hellenized Jews, although never a monolithic group, did not rely on another monotheistic group for their scriptures. Another unique aspect of the Beta Israel was the existence of communities of monks in its population. With the exception, once again, of the Hellenized Jews of Alexandria, they appear to be the only Jewish group to have had a tradition of monks and monasteries.

Yet another signal to cautious researchers that the Beta Israel were perhaps not descended from groups of immigrant Jews, was the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's large number of Jewish practices and customs. The most obvious of those are the observance of a Saturday Sabbath, the practice of circumcision, and the following of a modified version of the food laws found in the Hebrew Bible. These practices seemed to be quite old, and interestingly, early Christian Church Fathers complained about the

propensity of the Ethiopian Church to maintain and foster many Jewish practices. This reliance on Jewish custom in Ethiopian Christianity was explained by the union between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, and the reign of their son, Menelik. The common term for members of the Ethiopian ruling house was “Israelites,” and that name was also often applied to the rank and file of the Church. A deep and abiding sense of “Jewishness”—or more properly “Hebrewness”—has long roots in Ethiopian Christian identity. There seem to have been varying levels of “Judaising,” or practicing Jewish religious customs and traditions, in Ethiopian society from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries.

Eventually, this orientation toward Judaism and Jewish practices became a polarizing element in Ethiopian political life. The appearance in historical sources in the twelfth century of references to Judaized groups in the Lake Tana region of central Ethiopia is noteworthy, but nowhere in the historical sources is there reference that these groups came from outside of Ethiopia. These early Judaized groups, called *ayhud* in Ethiopian chronicles and histories (a term which means “Jew” with a semi-derogatory implication), were most likely members of the Orthodox Church who moved to Lake Tana to escape the increasingly drastic attempts by the Axumite kings to consolidate their rule by imposing religious uniformity on Ethiopia. The earliest clear reference to a Judaized group in Ethiopia appears in the chronicle of the wars of King Amda Seyon (1314–1344 CE). Jewish groups were reported to have offered stiff military resistance to Amda Seyon’s attempt to consolidate his rule, and they rose in revolt in 1332 CE. He responded with force, sending armies to “Semien, Wagara, Sallamt, and Sagade” (areas around Lake Tana) and quashed the revolt of these people who “[f]ormerly . . . were Christian but now they denied Christ like the Jews the crucifiers. For this reason [the king] sent (the troops) to destroy and devastate them. . . .”⁴⁶ This expedition was a success and according to the chronicle, opened the way for the evangelization of these regions.

Some Christian monks became active in proselytizing around Lake Tana. One such monk, Gabra Iyasus, was part of the Ewostatian monastic movement, which supported Judaic practices including the observance of the Saturday Sabbath. He supposedly had a great deal of success in the regions around Lake Tana, but Gabra Iyasus, a Christian monk with Judaized practices and ideas, preached to groups already heavily influenced by Judaism, so it is unknown exactly in what sort of “conversion” activity he was engaged.

Another monk with an impact on the *ayhud* was a cleric named Qozmos. According to an Ethiopian chronicle, he was an extreme ascetic who

left the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church when they tried to curb his practices. He fled to the countryside and became a miraculous, semi-divine character for the *ayhud* of Lake Tana. With Qozmos as their leader, the *ayhud* rose in revolt again and defeated the governor of Dambeya. Because of his ill treatment at the hands of his fellow clergy, Qozmos singled out priests for special retaliation, and he is said to have burned numerous churches and executed clergymen. The Emperor Dawit (1380–1412 CE) sent troops from Tigre to defeat the rebellion.

Until the reign of King Yeshaq, which began in 1413 CE, the *ayhud* of Lake Tana were of only peripheral concern to the Solomonic kings. Having more pressing problems than the “Jews” of Lake Tana, the kings intervened in the affairs of the *ayhud* only when there was insurrection. Yeshaq, however, took a harsher stand toward the *ayhud*. He was of a more Christianizing bent, and attempted, for the first time, to deny defeated *ayhud* peoples the right to own land. He decreed: “[m]ay he who is baptized in the Christian baptism inherit the land of his father; otherwise, let him be uprooted from his father’s land and be a stranger (*falasi*).”⁴⁷ The last word, the pejorative term for the Jews of Ethiopia, here tellingly means “landless peasant,” or serf. Despite Yeshaq’s considerable zeal, the issue of the *ayhud* remained largely unresolved. In the middle of the fifteenth century the *ayhud* were only temporarily subdued and, at best, nominally converted to Christianity and integrated into the Solomonic kingdom.

Further struggles commenced over the next hundred years. The Emperor Zar’ā Ya’eqob (1434–1468 CE) was forced to do battle with rebels in Sallamt and Semien, who “became Jews, abandoning their Christianity.”⁴⁸ This struggle continued for some time, and the status of the *ayhud* and their relationship to the growing power of the Ethiopian monarch remained largely unresolved.

There is no scholarly consensus identifying the *ayhud* with the group later called the Beta Israel. The term *ayhud* can be remarkably vague in the Ethiopian literature, referring, in some instances, to people who were probably Jews or Judaizing Christians, and in others, groups that the Solomonic kings and the Orthodox Church sought to identify pejoratively as rebels. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *ayhud* were depicted as neither religiously nor politically organized. Quite the contrary, they seem to have been very disparate groups. They were often “ruled” by rebel Christian priests or monks, or rebel governors, or local families. Very often *ayhud* groups even aligned themselves with Christians against other *ayhud* groups. An overarching sense of religious unity did not exist at this time, either among Christians or the *ayhud*, but rather economic and political considerations guided alliances.

The degree of the relationship between these early *ayhud* groups and the later Beta Israel is subject to much debate, but what can be said with some certainty is that the religious atmosphere of Ethiopia was fluid. The dividing line between those who considered themselves “Christian” and those who considered themselves “Jewish” was by no means firm. Quite the opposite situation was in effect: both groups, loosely defined, received influences from the other. A large gray area existed in the realm of religious identification, which nearly conceals for the historical researcher the true nature of the emergence of a duality. It also complicates the quest for a “Jewish” state in Ethiopia. If we cannot say with any degree of certainty who is a Jew and who is a Christian, then how can we make distinctions as to what is a Jewish state? As we shall see, only the continued polarization between *ayhud* and Christian groups would answer this question.

THE BIRTH OF THE BETA ISRAEL

A major change occurred in the status of the *ayhuds* in the Lake Tana region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the records of the time, they acquired a new name: *falasha*. As mentioned before, the word until quite recently was almost unanimously translated as “immigrants,” in the sense that this group was alien to Ethiopia. In fact, in the last twenty years, researchers have become increasingly aware that the term *falasha* was not used until the sixteenth century to designate “Jewish” persons in the Ethiopian population. Before this time, the term was used indiscriminately for a people or peoples deprived of the right to own land. One of the notable sources of the Ethiopian ruler’s power was the ability to distribute fiefs to loyal subjects. The owner of a fief had the right to collect taxes from the peasants on the land. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, large amounts of land were conquered by the emperor and placed under imperial control. Depending upon the emperor’s dispensation, local landowners could be deprived of their rights to own land and be rendered *falashi*. And land ownership, in medieval Ethiopia, was a paramount source of income and prestige.

Some of these *falashi* appeared to have “converted” to Christianity to regain their lands, while others fled to less settled areas, beyond the range of Ethiopian imperial control. Still more responded by abandoning agriculture entirely, and gradually, these groups of landless people began to practice handicrafts like pottery-making, weaving, and blacksmithing.

As we said, one of the most unusual practices of the Jews of Ethiopia was the institution of monasticism. Beta Israel history reveres a man named

Abba Sabra, a fifteenth-century Christian monk who clashed with his contemporary monarch and sought refuge in the isolated regions inhabited by the early Beta Israel. He is credited among the modern Beta Israel as their uniter and, along with other monastic leaders, helped the Beta Israel consolidate their sense of religious and cultural separateness. Abba Sabra and monks like him were mainly active from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, a time that was crucial for the emergence of the Beta Israel as a clearly defined group;⁴⁹ prior to this, very little can be said with certainty about the history of Jewish or Judaized groups in Ethiopia. They certainly existed, but the historical record offers us very little specific evidence.

The *ayhud* mentioned before the fourteenth century are not necessarily the same group or groups who emerged as the Falasha/Beta Israel following the fourteenth century. The vaguely articulated groups known as *ayhuds* became increasingly disenfranchised from the Ethiopian ruling house. This seemed to have a polarizing effect on the *ayhuds*, and the subtle differences between the “Christian” and “Judaized” groups in the country became more pronounced. Militant monks, most of whom were ejected from the mainstream Ethiopian Church, settled in the area around Lake Tana and gave the disparate *ayhud* groups a firmer social and religious structure. Under their leadership, the Biblical-Hebraic elements that were always found in Ethiopian Christianity became prominent and then dominant, giving these *ayhud* a firmer Jewish identity. At the same time, these elements became less pronounced in an increasingly orthodox Ethiopian Church. The stage was set for a Jewish autonomy in the Lake Tana region of Ethiopia.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE BETA ISRAEL

The Beta Israel reached the zenith of their political and military organization and prowess from 1468 to 1625 CE.⁵⁰ The Beta Israel realm was confined to several cities and regions, the most important of which were Semien, Sallamt, and Dambeya. Semien was ruled by a single Beta Israel family dynasty, who chose a leader from its ranks. The Beta Israel paid tribute to the Ethiopian emperors, but their relationship to the central state was complicated. Beta Israel military and political leaders often acted as politically independent agents. They exploited succession struggles within the royal house to further their political and military goals. Being on the physical fringes of the Ethiopian Empire helped them in their struggle for continued independence, as the Lake Tana region was difficult to reach, and its defenders had a military advantage over invaders.

Just such a struggle amongst the Beta Israel and the Christian Emperor Eskender began in 1484 CE. It took the emperor four years to subdue the Beta Israel, and many of the captured Jews appeared on the Middle Eastern slave markets. The slaves told stories of the independent Jews from the land of Prester John (as we saw in the previous chapter) fighting to preserve their freedom from Christian tyranny. The slaves may very well have exaggerated their political autonomy and military prowess, which would have fueled speculation about a great Jewish kingdom in the interior of Africa.

THE THREAT FROM ISLAM

The Beta Israel were not the greatest threat to the Ethiopian Christian monarchs. Starting in the mid-1400s, Muslim incursions began to unsettle Christian Ethiopia. Until the early 1500s, successive emperors defeated Muslim armies in their attempts to invade Ethiopia, but this situation was reversed in 1527, when the Muslim general Ahmad ibn Ibrihim, known popularly as “Gragn the left-handed,” led a two-pronged assault on the border of the Christian Kingdom. In 1529, Gragn’s troops defeated King Lebna Dengel’s better-trained and numerically superior troops at the battle of Shembra Koure. During the next twelve years, the highlands of Ethiopia witnessed little more than widespread carnage. Churches and monasteries were burned, and Christians were forcibly converted to Islam. Christian culture in Ethiopia suffered a severe setback during this protracted conflict, from which it never truly recovered.

Initially, the Beta Israel aligned themselves with the Muslims in a move to assert their independence. Gragn’s chronicler claimed that the general used Jews as guides. But by 1524 CE, most Beta Israel appeared to have switched sides, and when the Portuguese soldier and explorer Dom Cris-tóbal de Gama⁵¹ began to move inland to help Lebna Dengel’s successor, Gelawdewos, the Beta Israel sided with the Portuguese. The Beta Israel had once had a strategic high point known at the *Amba Ayhud* (Jew’s Rock), and they helped the Portuguese capture it back from the Muslims. During a setback in the campaign against the Muslims, Gelawdewos and the surviving Portuguese took refuge in the stronghold. When Gelawdewos defeated Gragn, the Beta Israel of Semien were given back their traditional rights as payment for their loyalty.

But the honeymoon was short-lived. Following the repulsion of the Muslim threat, Christian imperial power moved north, and the growing imperial presence around Lake Tana put increasing pressure on the Beta

Israel. Subsequent emperors exacted exorbitant tribute from the Beta Israel. Gelawdewos's brother, Minas, demanded not only tribute from the Beta Israel, but that they convert to Christianity.

But it was only during Sarsa Dengel's reign (1563–1597 CE) that the Beta Israel received the first in a series of lasting military setbacks. Sarsa Dengel established his imperial residence at Lake Tana. In 1579 he waged war against Beta Israel groups in Semien for failure to deliver their tributes. The main offender was Radai, the Beta Israel chief of Semien. But it proved difficult to subdue the resilient Beta Israel. They had a time-proven method of retreating into treacherous mountain strongholds where they could cast large stones down on royal troops. During this campaign, many Beta Israel martyred themselves rather than be captured, but their eventual defeat resulted in the enslavement of vast numbers of people, the loss of land, and forced conversions.⁵²

In all, Sarsa Dengel waged three campaigns against the Beta Israel. Although they were costly for the Beta Israel, the position of the Beta Israel in the region was largely unchanged. For the next ten years, dynastic struggles within the royal household kept monarchs busy with other matters than the Beta Israel. Kings claimed the throne, and rivals appeared to challenge those claims. One such king, Susenyos, was challenged by rebels led by a man named Gedwon and his Beta Israel supporters. Susenyos crushed the rebellion and as punishment for their support of the rebellion, he ordered his regional commander to kill all Beta Israel men and sell their wives and children into slavery. Some Beta Israel groups who did not participate in the rebellion were spared on the condition that they convert to Christianity. Susenyos waged further battles against the Beta Israel in 1625 or 1626 and defeated them, ending three hundred years of warfare, and brought a finale to Beta Israel political autonomy.⁵³

Susenyos's victories were not entirely effective because he had inadequate control of the land he conquered. His victory over the Beta Israel did not destroy their group identity. Still, never again would the Beta Israel be a significant military threat to imperial rule. Their long struggles with Christian, imperial Ethiopia had reached a tipping point. The Beta Israel began to turn religiously and politically inward, to abandon farming and to specialize in nonagrarian trades. However, they continued to have a reputation as fierce warriors and were employed as mercenaries in the same imperial army that sought to destroy them. Their skills as artisans were in such strong demand in the new capital of Gondar, particularly in royal and imperial circles, that the Beta Israel enjoyed a large measure of economic prosperity. Ironically, the rulers who had sought to eradicate the Beta Israel now demanded their skilled labor in the construction and

ornamentation of churches and palaces, as well as their services in the field of battle.

Following the assassination of Emperor Iyo'as in 1769 CE, imperial power in Ethiopia devolved, and ushered in the Era of the Princes.⁵⁴ As rulers competed with each other, Ethiopia fractured into competing fiefs, and the position of the Beta Israel, contingent as it was on royal support, deteriorated as the emperors grew weaker. In the decades that followed, their numbers were continually shrunken through conversion, poverty, and social marginalization. Only when they were recognized by world Jewry as authentic Jews did the Beta Israel of Ethiopia receive a reprieve from their long decline, albeit in dramatically altered conditions as immigrants in the State of Israel.

THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF ETHIOPIA

The categories “Jewish” and “Christian” prove remarkably ineffectual in the study of the Beta Israel. And by extension, the establishment of an independent “Jewish” kingdom in Ethiopia is complicated. Unlike the legendary image of David or Solomon, ruling a homogenously “Hebrew” kingdom from a strong central state, the history of the *ayhud* in remote Ethiopian antiquity, and their later incarnation as the Beta Israel, provides a considerably more muddled picture.

Foremost, the distinction between “Jew” and “Christian” in Ethiopia only hampers our view of the religious reality of premodern Ethiopia. As we saw, there was most likely some sort of Jewish presence in Ethiopia in the early centuries of the Common Era. The exact nature of that presence will probably never be known. But it somewhat impairs our view of the Jews of Ethiopia to see them as simply the descendants of Jewish groups who existed in Ethiopia prior to the arrival of Christianity who somehow maintained their “Hebraic” character in the face of the increasing Christianization of the country. Rather, Christianity in Ethiopia always had a distinctly Hebraic character, tracing its roots back to the coupling of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In a sense, all Ethiopians claimed descent, spiritually and genetically, from a Hebrew ancestor. Like the relationship between “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the first three centuries of the Common Era, before the two religions had radically and dramatically coalesced into separate faiths, the range of religious practices in Ethiopia was clearly complex and interpenetrative. Rather than a sharp line dividing the groups, there was a continuum. There was a great deal of mobility between religious groups in Ethiopia before modern times.

Before the coming of Westerners to Ethiopia in great numbers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it appears that the Beta Israel had remarkably little identification of themselves as “Jews.” As we saw, the term *ayhud*, or “Jew,” had a mostly negative connotation in Ethiopian culture. When Joseph Halevy, an early Jewish traveler in Lake Tana, asked the Beta Israel if they were Jews, they did not appear to understand his question. When he repeated the question, he asked if they were Israelites, and they assented. Both the Beta Israel and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church identified with their Hebraic heritage, but in different ways. The Orthodox Church and many Ethiopian kings used this heritage, primarily through the assertions about the divine origin of the monarch found in the *Kebra Nagast*, to impose their rule on the variegated religious groups of the country. The Beta Israel, on the other hand, used their Hebraic heritage to assert their independence from the central state and church, to resist imperial aggression, and to maintain a coherent community.

Recent scholarship, while claiming not to assault the Jewish identity of the Beta Israel, has really accomplished just that. One problem with the “Ethiopian” approach to the study of this group is its tendency to stress the areas of overlap and commonality between “Christian” and “Jewish” groups in Ethiopia, to the exclusion of their differences. This is a common problem with a certain type of historical study which fails to realize that groups who look so similar to outsiders that they appear as two sides of the same coin are still different groups. Relatively minor differences in the doctrine or practice of religions can be enough to cause conflict, for it is often not the vast areas of commonality that matters to those groups, but the relatively few and crucial areas of difference.

Certainly, the demythologizing of the history of the Beta Israel yields fascinating results. There is much to be learned from the study of the group’s Ethiopian context. Yet we must not lose sight of essential differences. The Beta Israel may have used the same books as their Christian neighbors, employed Christian scribes to write their books, and practiced monasticism like Orthodox monks, but there was a fundamental shift which was occurring in the Beta Israel’s use of these institutions and practices which was unique to themselves.

Even as the Beta Israel identity developed over time, and the group coalesced with that development, we can see a process which had distinct elements. First and foremost, it appears that both Christian and Judaic groups in Ethiopia viewed themselves as Israelites, and Ethiopia as the New Zion. If the Beta Israel are a relatively new group, then they latched

onto a concept in the fourteenth century that would bear its full fruit in the West in the nineteenth century: a Jewish polity can exist outside the messianic framework of Rabbinical Judaism. As nonrabbinical Jews, the Beta Israel were free to conceptualize a Jewish state within their own unique context. If that autonomy was never complete or pure, and if Jewish polities in Ethiopia resembled vassals, or states within states, we need to remind ourselves that such plurality always exists in a region—it still does today in the confines of Israel and Palestine—and the complexity of the political situation of the Ethiopian Jews therefore lends more credence to their form of political freedom.

The Jewish experience in Ethiopia forces us to rethink how we imagine a person called a “Jew” and the religion called “Judaism.” We must see the Jewish experience as not a monolithic entity, finding expression in a few well-worn and comfortable paths, but as something as multiform and varied. Jewish expression in Ethiopia, and its various forms of political autonomy, was just as much an aspect of Jewish consciousness as any other. If there were shifts in emphasis, the same can be said about all forms of Judaism, and especially regarding the modern form of Zionism, with its political, cultural, and even religious orientations.

So the Beta Israel Kingdoms of Ethiopia *were* a form of a new, other Zion. And most importantly for us, the exploits of the Beta Israel became the fuel for imagination of Jewish autonomy in the Middle Ages. The mythological context of the Jewish experience in Ethiopia had repercussions outside the relatively isolated Ethiopian cultural and religious scene. The Jews of the West and the Middle East, largely marginalized in their respective homelands in the Middle Ages, were free to fantasize about Ethiopia, its Jews, and their independent Jewish kingdom which dared to wage war against Christian and Muslim rulers alike.

THE BETA ISRAEL ZION

There is little doubt that the Beta Israel conceptualized Ethiopia as the new Zion. They even shared this vision with Christian Ethiopians. As such, the Beta Israel, when they fought for their independence during the heyday of their military power, were fighting not just for a religious ideal, but for a political reality. The memory of their independence—of their princes and even kings—still remains a potent force in Beta Israel culture and religion even in the State of Israel. Regardless of the ultimate origin of this fascinating group, they belong to a select set: members of a Jewish

polity outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel. The Beta Israel, perhaps as an inheritance of their political autonomy, remain a fiercely proud people. They fought and continue to fight attempts to marginalize them in Israeli society, and their religious cousins, the Falash Mura (who will be discussed in the final chapter), are taking up this cause as well.⁵⁵

FOUR

THOUGH WE ARE FAR FROM ZION: THE KHAZAR JEWISH KINGDOM

A TURKIC TRIBE CONVERTS

In the sixth century a Turkic tribe known as the Khazars (a name which may mean “wanderers”)¹ settled in the northern Caucasus region along the Caspian Sea. Sometime later, and no one agrees on the date, the royal house of the Khazars and some of its noblemen converted to Judaism. In the lands of Islam and Christendom during the Middle Ages, this contributed to a potent myth which we have already encountered: out beyond the borders of the known world was a strong, mighty nation of Jews whose neck was under no gentile yoke.

The Khazars were part of a wider movement of Turkic peoples migrating west from Central Asia and near the border of China in the east. These nomads were powerful warriors and overwhelmed more settled communities.² The Khazars’ native religion was centered around a chief god named Tengri and a host of subordinate deities. The Khazars and other Turkic groups had long lived next to the Chinese, so Confucian notions infiltrated the early Khazar religion. The Khazars, like most Turkic peoples, were vibrant animists: they endowed much of the natural world with spiritual significance and viewed both the inanimate and animate objects in the world as teeming with souls.

When the Khazars settled near the Caspian Sea and established their own state, they found themselves surrounded by monotheists. To the south were the lands of Islam and to the west was the eastern Roman Empire, known as Byzantium. The region they conquered was most likely home to Muslims, Christians, Jews, and native pagans. The pressure for Turks to convert to the religions they encountered was great: prestige was connected to the religions of the more settled, cosmopolitan powers that surrounded them, and the adoption of a religion by a monarch and nobles was often a way of creating a powerful military alliance with neighboring

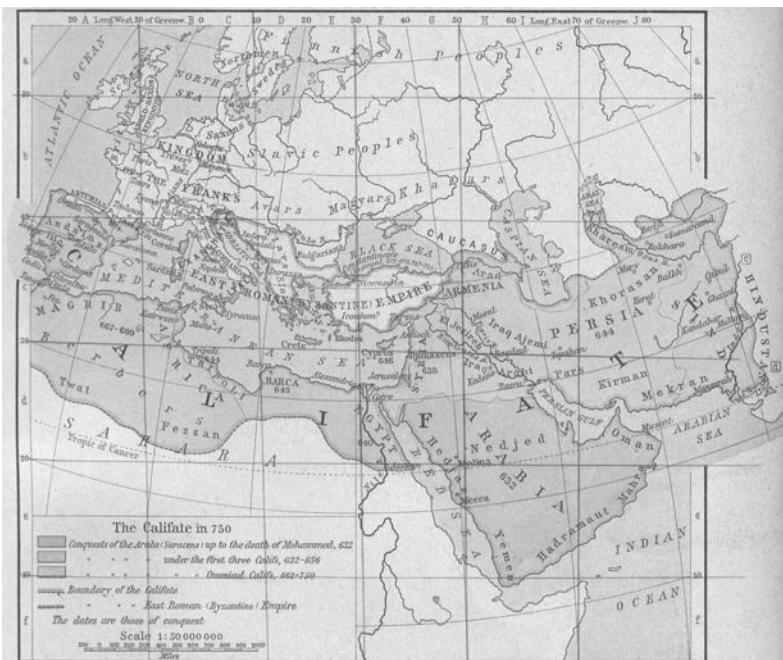


Figure 4.1. Map of Khazaria

A map of nations that bordered the Khazars in 750 CE.
Courtesy of University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Library.

states. This makes Khazaria's adoption of Judaism as the state religion appear rather strange. Judaism was the religion of a scattered and dispossessed people, long divorced from the reigns of significant political or military power, and at first glance, it seems that it would offer no benefit to the Khazar royalty. But as we shall see, the situation was complicated. For the Khazars, the tents of Jacob may have been a politically congenial place to dwell.

THE KHAZARS WRITE THEIR LETTERS

Before the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, when Jews were given unprecedented freedom in Western nations and achieved, at least in the eyes of the law, equal rights along with their gentile neighbors, it was only occasionally that exceptional Jews were able to transcend the limits of their time and place to enter the wider sphere of culture, politics, and power. One such Jew was Hasdai Ibn Shaprut. Born in Jaen, Spain, in 915 CE to

a family of wealthy Spanish Jews, he aspired to master the knowledge of his day, both in the realm of Judaism and the wider world. He was fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin and began his career with a translation of a medical work from Latin into Arabic for the caliph Abd ar-Rahman III (912–961 CE). Hasdai was a deeply engaging character and soon was the close confidant of the Caliph. Like many prominent Jews in the Muslim world, he was a talented physician and was shortly appointed the Caliph's chief doctor. Soon he was promoted to the post of vizier, or chief minister (in practice only, since a Jew could not officially occupy that position). As vizier *pro tempore*, Hasdai exercised a role like the U. S. Secretary of State, handling foreign affairs for the Muslim Spanish government. In this capacity, he penned a voluminous correspondence. When he wrote to states outside the Arab world, he often wrote his letters in Hebrew to prominent Jews in those states, who would then translate the letters into their national tongues for their rulers. In this way, a large number of Hasdai's letters were preserved. He was also a vigorous patron of Jewish poetry and arts. He played a significant role in the incredible revival of the Hebrew language in Spain. And whenever he could, Hasdai intervened to help Jews in both Spain and abroad, using whatever diplomatic leverage he could to give succor to his coreligionists in other lands.

In the course of his duties, Hasdai often heard of exotic Jewish communities, and when possible, he contacted them. In or around 960 CE, Hasdai met diplomats from Constantinople and accompanying them were two Jews. They told him that an independent Jewish state existed to the east of Byzantium. Hasdai, obviously interested in this bit of lore, drafted a letter to the king of this Jewish state and entrusted the two Byzantine Jews to deliver the epistle.³ The letter, written in the elaborate style of Jewish diplomatic correspondence of the time, read:

[This letter has been sent] by me, Chisdai the son of Yitzchak the son of Ezra, a descendant of the exiled of Jerusalem who settled in Spain. I am a servant to my master, the King. I lower my face to the ground in his presence, and prostrate myself facing the lofty King's faraway dwelling place. I rejoice in the King's well-being, and I am happy over the King's greatness and peace. I spread my hands [in prayer] to God in the heavens, that He should lengthen the King's reign amongst Israel. . .⁴

Then, Hasdai introduces himself and the Jews of Spain. He tells of the current Muslim ruler of the country and explains that the land is rich in natural resources, produce, and precious metals and that the Muslim ruler of Spain controls enormous wealth and collects tribute from surrounding states. Hasdai explains how he heard about the Kingdom of the Khazars: as the

keeper of the king's treasury all "mercantile activity is under my jurisdiction."⁵ So, in this capacity, Hasdai explains, he meets many merchants and emissaries from other kingdoms and never fails to inquire about the condition of the Israelites, "the remnant of the Diaspora."⁶ One group of mercantile emissaries from Khorasan tells him that a kingdom of Jews called the "Cusars" does in fact exist. Hasdai is skeptical, until he meets some Jewish emissaries from Constantinople, who tell him that the account is true. They explain: "the kingdom is called Khazaria. It is a fifteen-day journey from their country Constantina to Khazaria. It is via the sea . . . The ruling king is named Yoseph"⁷ . . . and they have trade contacts with the Jews and gentiles of Constantinople. Hasdai is informed of their great wealth and power. This Jewish kingdom has "strength and might; their troops and soldiers emerge periodically [to go on expeditions]."⁸

Hasdai informs the king of the Khazars that this conversation prompted him to write his letter. He then explains his first attempt to send the letter, which had ended in failure. Then, he relates how ambassadors from the Kingdom of Gebalim arrived in Spain, and with them were two Jews, Mar Saul and Mar Joseph. He says that these men offered to take the letter to Jews in the land of Hungary, who could then deliver it to the Russ, and the Bulgars, and finally to the land of the Khazars.

Hasdai explains to the king that he sent this letter not for his own honor, but simply to know the truth. He yearns to know if there is a place with "a rulership and kingdom for the exiled of Israel, where they are not oppressed and subjugated?"⁹ The letter then relates a curious episode. Hasdai wishes to know the condition of the Israelites who dwell in the land of the Khazars and how they got there. He relates an old legend that Jews settled in that area after being driven out by a series of persecutions and thus hid the Holy Scriptures in a cave in which they then prayed. Over time they became ignorant of the origin of reason for their place of prayer, and after a long time, an Israelite who passed through wished to know why they prayed in a cave. Upon entering it, he found the books, brought them out, and explained their meaning to the ignorant Jews. (As we will see, variations of this legend continually return in medieval sources which speak about Khazarian Judaism.)

Hasdai concludes his letter to King Joseph with a series of questions about the nature of the Khazarian kingdom. He also asks, somewhat expectantly, if the great king knows when the hour of the "end of our exile"¹⁰ will occur, and informs the king what wild hopes the news of his kingdom has instilled in the minds of the Spanish Jews.

Hasdai's letter is informative. He expresses his cautious hope that an independent Jewish kingdom exists. At first he had been trepidatious

about the news from the Jews of Khorasan concerning its existence. It was only when the ambassadors from Constantinople arrived and confirmed the kingdom's existence, and its name—Alcusari—that he truly believed. In this letter, Hasdai alluded to the servitude of the Jews in Muslim and Christian lands and further suggested that this kingdom, if it truly did exist, must be comprised of none other than the Lost Tribes of Israel. In keeping with the messianic expectations we saw in the chapter concerning the Lost Tribes, Hasdai fit the Khazar Jewish kingdom into the Lost Tribes mold. If an independent Jewish kingdom did exist—especially one that was warlike and mighty, as the stories told to Hasdai suggested, it may have proven useful for the redemption of Jews in Muslim and Christian lands.

Hasdai Ibn Shaprut had a towering reputation in the world of international diplomacy, so we should not be surprised to learn that he received a response to his letter. Unlike Hasdai's letter, which was written in an ornate Hebrew, King Joseph's Reply (as the letter has become known) was written in far simpler Hebrew prose. The Khazar Jewish state could not compete with the erudition and literary skill of the Jews of tenth-century Spain. Yet for all its simplicity, the response is utterly fascinating and opens a view on a unique example of an independent Jewish nation sandwiched between the lands of Christianity and Islam. The letter begins with information about its carrier: ". . . I hereby inform you that your letter, which was adorned with pleasing language, reached us via a Jew from the land of Nemetz [Germany], whose name is Yitzchak son of Eliezer. We were happy [to learn] about you, and we rejoiced in your understanding and wisdom. . . . We will hereby answer everything in your letter. . . ."¹¹

And like Hasdai, King Joseph threw in some bits of historical lore. He said "Regarding what you said about your land and the lineage of its ruler, this news had already reached us,"¹² and explained that "Our ancestors had already possessed letters" from Spain that were "preserved in our annals" and are "known to all the elders of our land."¹³ Here, King Joseph implied that the Khazars and the Jews of Spain had been in contact in the past—a contact which Hasdai was apparently unaware of. The letter then set out to answer some of Hasdai's questions about this Jewish kingdom:

You asked in your letter from what nation, family, or tribe are we. I hereby inform you that we are descendants of Yefes, from the progeny of Togarmah. This is what I have found in the family archives of my ancestors. Togarmah had ten sons, and these were their names: The firstborn was Avyur, then Turis, Avar, Oguz, Bizell, Tarna, Khazar, Yinor, Bulgar, and Savir.¹⁴

Here the letter contains a mix of Biblical and Turkic tribal history. Togarmah is listed in the table of generations in Genesis and in the Jewish tradition is considered the ancestor of all Turkic people. The list of Togarmah's offspring comes from Turkic tribal lore. The ancestor of the Khazars is the seventh son by the same name, Khazar. In his letter, Hasdai had hinted that the Khazars might be descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. King Joseph refutes this and explains that his ancestors are from Turkic stock. At the very start, the Khazar king explains the origins of his Jewish state: his ancestors came not through the eponymous Shem, like the ancestors of all Semites, including the Jews. From there, the king goes on to explain the concrete origin of the Khazar kingdom:

"The land in which I live was previously inhabited by the Vanantar [Bulgars]. Our ancestors, the Khazars, fought against them. The Vanantar were as numerous as the [grains of] sand on the beach, but they still could not withstand the Khazars. Thus they abandoned their land and fled. The Khazars pursued them until they finally caught up with them at the Duna [Danube] River. To this day, the Vanantar dwell by the Duna River, near Constantina. The Khazars occupy their land to this day."¹⁵

So the Khazars, after a period of weakness and wandering, defeated their enemies and settled down in a territory. Then, according to the letter, they enjoyed an interlude of silence. Then several generations passed (with only a short phrase to acknowledge them), and then the letter sets up the Khazars' conversion to Judaism. King Joseph's letter goes on to explain that

"... a king arose by the name of Bulan. He was a wise and God-fearing man. He had trust in his Creator, and he abolished the diviners and idolaters from our land. At the same time, he sought refuge under the shadow of God's wings. An angel appeared to him and said, 'Bulan, God has sent me to you with this message: 'My son, I have heard your supplication. I therefore bless you, make you fruitful, and cause you to multiply to a very great degree. I will establish your kingdom until one thousand generations, and I will deliver all your enemies into your hand.' Now, rise in the morning and pray to God."¹⁶

Bulan seems to be a monotheist of some sort since he sees fit to expel the wizards and idolaters from his land. (These were probably the shamanistic priests who were the traditional religious functionaries in Turkic tribes.) But King Bulan fears that his adoption of a foreign religion will alienate him from both his princes and the people. He asks that the angel appear to the "highest officer" of the people so that "he will help me in this endeavor."¹⁷ This may be a passing reference to the dual kingship of the Khazar kingdom that is mentioned in Arab documents, and which

will be further examined below. So the angel agrees to appear in a dream to this prince, and they accept the new religion. Then the king gathers “all of his officers and servants, along with the entire nation, and recounted to them all these things. The people embraced this religion and entered under the wings of the Divine Presence.”¹⁸ Following this, an angel appears to Bulan another time, saying “My son, the heavens and earth cannot contain Me. Nevertheless, My son, build a temple in My Name, and I will dwell in it.”¹⁹ The king explains that he does not have the requisite gold and silver to build such a structure, and the angel instructs the king to go out on a campaign against his enemies, saying He will “deliver them into your hand.”²⁰ The king leads a successful military campaign. He then constructs a tabernacle “with the Ark, the Menorah, the Table, the Altars, and the holy vessels.”²¹ This detail is exceedingly interesting. Here, Bulan constructs the instruments of Temple worship in Jerusalem.

Following this detail, King Joseph explains that Bulan attracted the attention of the Christian monarch in Byzantium and the Muslim Caliph in Baghdad. The rulers sent envoys who tried to convert the Khazars to Christianity and Islam, respectively, and thus bring the Khazars under their suzerainty. In the next section is told one of the abiding myths about the Khazars, which would be repeated numerous times in the Middle Ages. King Joseph says that Bulan sent for a rabbi and called for a disputation between the three men to judge their claims. He brought the followers of the different religions together, that they might enter into a discussion of their respective doctrines.²² The first debate is deadlocked. On the following two days, the king has private discussions with the Christian and Muslim theologians. On the fourth day he invites all three back for a second debate and asks a pointed question to break the impasse: “I request that you select for me the best and most upright of all religions.” They begin to speak but are unable to arrive at any resolution. Finally, the king turns to the Byzantine wise man and asks, “What do you say: Between Judaism and Islam, which one is more honorable?” The wise man answers, “Judaism is more honorable than Islam.” The king then asks the *Qadi*, “What do you say: Between Christianity and Judaism, which one is more honorable?” The *Qadi* answered, “Judaism is more honorable.”²³

The answers of the Muslim cleric and the Christian priest support the claims of Judaism. The Muslim, as a member of a religion which considers its founder the Prophet Abraham, has more affinity with Judaism than with Christianity. The priest, in turn, cannot vouch for the veracity of Mohammad’s claims as the last prophet, for this would essentially trump Jesus. Following this, the king declares that “the religion of Avraham” is

that of his realm and from that point on, “God will come to my aid.”²⁴ We can now see that the conversion of Bulan in the previous episode, where he was visited by the angel, and where the prince, the nobility, and the people declared their new god, was in some sense incomplete. For during the interreligious debates, the people cannot decide which religion is true. Only following the debate is Bulan circumcised. The God of Israel rewards King Bulan’s conversion by giving him power over his enemies. However, the conversion apparently is still incomplete, for in the next section, a descendant of Bulan reinvigorates Judaism in Khazaria:

After these events, a king arose from Bulan’s descendants whose name was Ovadyah. He was righteous and upright, and he renewed the kingdom and established the religion according to religious law (*halachah*). He built synagogues and study halls, and gathered in many Jewish sages. He gave them much silver and gold, and they explained the twenty-four books [of *Tanach*], as well as *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, and the proper versions of the prayers.²⁵

Interestingly, Bulan is a Turkic name, and we are not told of a Hebrew name given to the converted king. Starting with King Obadiah and his reforms, all of the kings have Hebrew names. Even in this legendary account, the conversion of the Khazars is portrayed as occurring in multiple stages. Bulan appeared to have started the Khazars on the road to monotheism and may have practiced a number of rites without fully embracing Judaism. He may have practiced animal sacrifice, since he had the instruments of Temple worship at his disposal. Obadiah led a “reform” movement, and interestingly, the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, which are the essential texts of Rabbinical Judaism, are mentioned for the first time, along with the “order of divine services,” as if synagogue worship and its liturgical system had been newly introduced in Khazaria. Beginning with the reign of Obadiah, Rabbinical Judaism was practiced in Khazaria. In the next section of the letter, we learn that its author, King Joseph, is a descendant of Bulan and Obadiah, for he provides a genealogy:

After him arose Chizkiyahu, his son. After him arose Menashe his son. After him arose Chanina or Chanukah, Ovadyah’s brother, and then Yitzchak his son, then Zevulun his son, then Moshe his son, then Nissi his son, then Menachem his son, then Binyamin his son, then Aharon his son, and then finally myself, Yoseph the son of Aharon. We are thus kings, and the sons of kings. No stranger may sit upon the throne of our ancestors; only a son may sit on his father’s throne.²⁶

After this genealogy of the Khazar kings, Joseph provides political and geographical information concerning his kingdom:

Regarding your question about the extent of the land, its length and width, it is next to the Atil [Volga] River, which is near the Gurgan [Caspian] Sea. . . . Along the river, many nations dwell . . . They all pay taxes to me. . . . I sit at the river harbors, and do not allow the Rus who come by boat to pass through them. Similarly, I do not allow any of their enemies who would travel by land to pass through to their land. I am fighting a difficult war with them, but were I to leave them alone, they would destroy all Ishmaelite land as far as Baghdad.²⁷

The multiethnic nature of the Khazar state is stressed, with special mention of the three Abrahamic faiths. There are three districts in the capital city:

One is where the queen lives with her maidens and eunuchs. . . . Its inhabitants are Jews, Muslims, and Christians, as well as people of other nations and languages. . . . The third district is where I live with my officers, my servants, and all my close ministers. It is the smallest . . . The river flows through the walls of this district. We reside in the province for the entire winter. During the month of Nisan, we leave the province and each man goes to his field, his garden, and to his work. Each family also owns a separate plot of land as an inheritance from their ancestors. Each one goes to his respective place and settles there with joy and song.²⁸

The letter has a utopian note here, the kind found in Prester John's correspondence:

No one hears an oppressor's voice; there is no Satan nor any evil injury. . . . The land does not receive a lot of rain, but it has many rivers, which contain many fish. We also have many springs. The land is good and fertile, with fields, vineyards, gardens, and orchards. All of them are irrigated by the rivers. We have all kinds of fruit trees in abundance.²⁹

Finally, King Joseph fields Hasdai's questions about the end of times, and the arrival of the Messiah. If Hasdai placed hopes that the Khazar king was the long-awaited military and spiritual leader of the Jews, then what follows surely dashed those hopes:

You further asked about the mysterious end of days. Our eyes are turned toward the Lord our God and toward the Sages of Israel, both from the academy of Jerusalem and the academy of Babylon. We are far away from Zion, but we did hear that because of our many sins, all the calculations are in error, and we really know nothing. But may it be proper in God's eyes to redeem us, and may He act for His great Name's sake.³⁰

This Khazar king has no desire to present himself as a messianic figure. Most likely, the Khazar kings had no designs on conquering the Holy

Land. As we will see below, the political and military troubles of the Khazars kept them amply occupied close to their home. The letter ends with the king expressing his desire to see Hasdai, stressing that if Hasdai should come to his land "my whole nation would be sustained,"³¹ and ends with a simple farewell.

If Hasdai had any reaction to his answered letter, none survived. But it seemed that further contact between the Jews of Spain and the Khazars occurred. Abraham ibn Daud, in his *Book of Tradition* (1100 CE), explains:

You will find congregations of Israel spread abroad . . . in all of Africa, Egypt, the country of the Sabaean, Arabia, Babylonia, Elam, Persia, Deban . . . as far as Daylam and the river Itil, where live the Khazar peoples who became proselytes. Their king Joseph sent a letter to R. Hasday, the prince, bar Isaac ben Shaprut, and informed him that he and his people followed the Rabbinite faith. We have seen in Toledo some of their descendants, pupils of the wise and they told us that the remnant of them followed the Rabbanite faith.³²

Through Hasdai ibn Shaprut's correspondence with King Joseph, the Jews in the West became aware of Jewish Khazaria. The short response is informative about the kingdom. It explains how it was founded by a Turkic people, whose legendary king Bulan converted to Judaism or was Judaized after a debate between clerics from Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. He was rewarded for this move by God with military success and material prosperity. But it was only during the reign of Obadiah that the religion of the Khazars was brought into full conformity with Rabbinical Judaism. The snapshot of the kingdom's inhabitants is telling: rather than claiming that the entire people were converted to Judaism, King Joseph explains that Jews, Christians, and Muslims dwelled in his land. The Khazar kings ruled a land of diverse peoples and religions. The state was not monolithically Jewish.

The Khazars remained a mystery from the Middle Ages until the late nineteenth century. Forging letters from famous people or exotic locations was not an unknown custom during the Middle Ages. So it is understandable that in the nineteenth century, a more skeptical age viewed the Khazars as little more than a legend. Yet it was just this new age of scientific rigor that eventually revived the Khazars from the realm of myth and placed them on a firmer historical footing. As Western investigators gained access to document discoveries in the Middle East, a new age of scientific historiography was opened up, and what it found out about the Jewish Khazars kingdom was nothing short of astonishing.

THE TREASURE IN CAIRO

Hasdai ibn Shaprut's letters with King Joseph disappeared for some time. If it were not for the work of the Spanish Jewish poet Judah HaLevi (1085–1141 CE), the Khazars would have been nearly forgotten. HaLevi wrote a lengthy philosophical work in the form of a dialogue called *The Kuzari* and used a religious debate between a Jew, Muslim, and Christian cleric before the Khazar king as his dramatic focus. *The Kuzari* remains one of the philosophical masterpieces of the Jewish Middle Ages.³³ But in the sixteenth century, Isaac Abraham Akrish, a collector and publisher of books, recovered the Khazar correspondence in his travels between Constantinople and Egypt. For centuries, scholars had presumed that King Joseph's Reply was a forgery.³⁴ Few scholars doubted that Khazar kings had converted to Judaism, at least for some time period, but most doubted that King Joseph's Reply was an authentic document from Khazaria. For one, they were suspicious that the letter existed in two manuscript forms—one “long” and the other “short”—and there were no other Hebrew documents to substantiate the claims made in King Joseph's Reply. There exist Arab and Byzantine sources that mention the Khazars' conversion to Judaism, and it was surmised that the author of King Joseph's Reply had been heavily reliant on these accounts for his information.

But in the late nineteenth century, another Hebrew document was discovered that shed light on the Jewish Khazar Kingdom. At first, its discovery seemed to disprove the veracity of the Khazar correspondence. A Jewish congregation in the old city of Cairo had long kept unused documents in an attic storage space of a synagogue known in Hebrew as a geniza. The word originates from the Persian word *ganj*, meaning treasure. In Jewish tradition, it is forbidden to discard any piece of paper that contains the name of God. For Jews in the Middle Ages, correspondence began with elaborate formulaic blessings that often contained God's name. So these simple, often sundry letters had to be preserved or discarded in a legally valid manner.³⁵ Beginning in or around the turn of the first millennium, the Jews of Fustat began to store their old papers in the geniza, and continued the practice, with some interruption, right until the discovery of the geniza by Western scholars at the end of the nineteenth century.

One of the foremost investigators of the geniza was Solomon Schechter. Documents from the geniza were being siphoned away on the antiquities markets, and Schechter arranged to have much of the remaining store of documents moved to the Cambridge University Library. Research into geniza documents was a daunting task. Unlike archives, which preserve

documents in a chronological fashion with a system available for document retrieval, the geniza was essentially a storage place for paper. There was no order to the materials, and much of it was in a decaying, fragmentary state. Documents from the very early history of the geniza's use were mixed with contemporary material. The *geniza* and its precious contents were known to antiquities dealers, who were often allowed into the room to remove books and manuscripts, which contributed to the general welter of the documents.

Despite the challenges of studying these precious documents, the Cairo Geniza is one of the most important documentary finds about the Jewish Middle Ages, and by extension, since the Jews in Cairo were living in Arab lands, about the Muslim Middle Ages. The cache of documents has been rightly compared in importance to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea and the Nag Hammadi cache of Gnostic documents found in the desert of Upper Egypt. Among the thousands of documents, manuscripts, and fragments found in the geniza was one known as the "Schechter Text," or "Schechter Letter." A fragment of a larger work, it begins *in media res*, in the middle of a story explaining that a group of Jews fled Armenia, because they were "unable to bear the yoke of the worshippers of idols."³⁶ The people of Khazaria accept them, and they intermarry with the Jews. The Jews learn the practices of the land and go out to war with the natives. The Jews living in Khazaria continue to practice some Jewish rites—most notably circumcision—and even keep the Sabbath. The Schechter Text explains that at this time there was no king in Khazaria, so the most powerful general was chosen as the leader of the country. The document explains that one day a certain Jew goes out to battle and is victorious over Khazaria's enemies, and according to the custom of the land, is made the chief officer of the army and leader of the people. After the victory, God moves the newly appointed leader to return to more orthodox Judaism, and the "Lord had mercy and awakened the heart of the prince to do repentance."³⁷ When the kings of the surrounding lands of Maqedon (Byzantine Greece) and Arabia hear of the new king's reversion to Judaism, they grow alarmed and "sent messengers to the princes of Khazaria (with) words of blasphemy against Israel, saying: 'What mean ye by returning to the belief of the Jews who are subject under the hands of all the nations?'"³⁸ So the new king invites religious representatives from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism to come to his land and debate the truth of their religions. During the debate, the Christian Greek is rebutted by the Muslim Arab and the Jew, and afterward, the Muslim Arab is rebutted by the Jew and Christian Greek. Then, the text goes on to explain, the Jew recounts the story of the creation of

the universe in six days, up to the story when the children of Israel came up from Egypt. The Christian Greek and Muslim Arab “bore witness” to the truth³⁹ of the tale of the world’s creation and Israel’s freedom from bondage in Egypt, but further disagreements develop.

Then, the text explains, officers of Khazaria tell the Jewish representative, “Behold, there is a cave in the valley of Tizul.⁴⁰ Bring forth to us the books which are there and explain them to us.”⁴¹ According to the text, there, in the cave, are the books of the Torah of Moses. The rabbi expounds on the mysteries contained in the Torah scroll, and the people of Khazaria are so impressed by the exposition that they return completely to the full practice of Judaism.

Jews from other lands then arrive to strengthen the hold of Judaism in Khazaria. The general who initiated the return to the faith is appointed king over the Khazars and is given the title “khagan,” a title used “unto this day.”⁴² He changes his name (though we were not told what it had been before) to Sabriel. The text then explains that “they say in our land that our ancestors came from the tribe of Simeon, but we are not able to probe the truth of the matter.”⁴³ (The tribe of Simeon was one of the Lost Tribes.) The narrative then gives an account of Khazar wars and alliances with their neighbors, along with geographical information about the realm, before the manuscript abruptly ends.

Early researchers regarded the Schechter Letter with suspicion. By the late nineteenth century the veracity of Hasdai ibn Shaprut’s correspondence with the Khazar king had been largely accepted, and the Schechter Text appeared to contradict it in key ways. For one, King Joseph’s Reply mentioned nothing of early Jewish settlers in his realm. Bulan, King Joseph’s ancestor, had accepted Judaism, or a type of proto-monotheism, after God called to him in a dream. In King Joseph’s Reply, Bulan held a religious debate with the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clerics at his own accord, and not at the prodding of Arab and Greek kings as in the Schechter Letter. The Khazar kingship appeared to have existed before the conversion of its kings to Judaism, but the Schechter Text made the establishment of the kingship contingent with the acceptance of formal Judaism. Also novel are the tale of the cave and the scrolls of the Law retrieved during the debate.⁴⁴ The scrolls of the Law were in that cave, we can speculate, because they were a treasured relic from the Jewish refugees of Armenia. In the Schechter Letter, the religious debates confirm the truth of Judaism against Islam and Christianity, and a large-scale return to Judaism is initiated in Khazaria. The newly appointed king is given a Hebrew name, and Jewish scholars from neighboring lands settle in Khazaria and help strengthen the hold of Judaism. In his letter, King Joseph does not claim Semitic descent

and explicitly shows the Khazars' relation to the sons of Noah through an eponymous Turkic ancestor. The writer of the Schechter Letter, however, mentions that his people may be descended from the lost tribe of Simeon.

Schechter, to a degree, doubted the letter's historical worth. He suspected there were far too many geographical and chronological errors for it to represent a true Khazar document and thought that the letter did not correspond accurately enough with King Joseph's Reply.⁴⁵ However, recent scholarship has been more favorable to the Schechter Text. Norman Golb and Omeljan Pritsak, in their study *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* show quite convincingly that the Schechter Text is most likely yet another piece of correspondence between the Khazars and Hasdai ibn Shaprut, though this time not from the king of the Khazars but from a commoner. In both the Hebrew style of the letter and on general historical grounds, Golb and Pritsak see King Joseph's Reply and the Schechter's Letter as complementary. As a late nineteenth-century scholar, Schechter was seeking the bedrock truth of the Khazars' conversion to Judaism, while Golb and Pritsak see the version of events in King Joseph's Reply and the Schechter Text as two versions of the same legendary event. They view the former as the royal account, and the latter as a more popular tale, told by indigenous Jews in Khazaria. One stresses the divine right of the Khazar kings to rule by a mandate from the Jewish God, while the other emphasizes the instrumental nature of the "native" Jews of Khazaria in the spread of a more orthodox Judaism in the kingdom.

Interestingly, the conversion to Judaism of the Khazars is a long process in both letters. In King Joseph's Reply, it is Bulan who converts to Judaism, but that conversion is viewed as incomplete by his descendant Obadiah, who himself leads a revival of Judaism. He invites Jewish scholars and sages from adjoining lands to settle in Khazaria, and the Talmud and Mishnah—the key texts of Rabbinical Judaism—are introduced for the first time in Khazaria. In the Schechter Letter, there existed an original layer of Judaism in the Khazar Kingdom. A group of Jews from Armenia enter the land, intermarry with its inhabitants, and give up many Jewish customs while preserving others. The future king Sabriel is called a "Jew," although he is not fully observant. A religious disputation takes place between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian clerics, much like in King Joseph's Reply. But unlike in that letter, the result is not the *adoption* of Judaism, but a *return* to it. Both letters tell a mythical account of the change to Judaism by the people. They are neither wholly true nor wholly false, but both tell, in legendary language, of a process that probably took decades to complete.

The Khazars spoke in their own words in one more letter, and this one too had its origins in the Cairo Geniza. Both King Joseph's Reply and the Schechter Text appeared to confirm the theory, long held by scholars, that Judaism was the court religion in Khazaria. In an age when one's religious affiliation was tantamount to one's personal identity, the religion of a king was no small matter. The Khazars were a Turkic people, and once they settled in the Caspian region they were confronted by the religions of more settled peoples, particularly Islam to the south and Christianity to the west. The pressure upon successive Khazar monarchs to accept one of these religions was no doubt great. Converting to Christianity would have allied Khazaria with the Byzantine Greeks, and converting to Islam would have allied them with the Muslim Caliphate. Many scholars have long thought that the conversion to Judaism of the Khazar king and court was politically inspired. By choosing a nonaligned monotheistic faith, the Khazars asserted their independence from their immediate neighbors. Judaism was an interesting choice, given the reaction such a move must have created in Baghdad and Constantinople. Judaism was hardly a "neutral" religion to adopt. No doubt the Christian Emperor and Muslim Caliph did not greet the decision favorably. Regardless of the logical and historical ironies of the choice, scholars continued to repeat the theory: the Khazar king chose Judaism as his religion because it would keep his country politically free. Judaism in Khazaria had always been seen as the religion of the political elite and never had deep roots with the common people.

THE JEWS OF KIEV APPEAL FOR MONEY

Solomon Schechter brought the majority of documents from the geniza to the Cambridge University Library. Among them, some 1,800 documents were preserved under glass. Indeed, so much material was mined from the geniza that much of its content still has not been closely examined. Around the turn of the century, a handwritten list was compiled. It was not published but was available to researchers upon request. In 1962, the scholar Norman Golb made a survey of the list and the documents under glass, and one object caught his attention. It was listed as T-S (Glass) 12.122, in the nomenclature of geniza document storage at Cambridge. Golb was impressed by the antiquity of the letter and the unique names that appeared on it—most of a non-Semitic origin. He recognized in the text the Medieval Hebrew name for Kiev, a city in the Khazarian

Kingdom. The letter was written entirely in Hebrew with the exception of a single word at the bottom of the last page, which appeared to be in a Turkic language and was written in runes.⁴⁶ The document that Golb discovered (or rediscovered) is now known as the Kievan Letter and has become generally accepted as an authentic artifact from Khazarian Jews, making it only the third such known document, after King Joseph's Reply and the Schechter Text. But the contents of the Kievan Letter are far different from those of its predecessors. It was not written for the purpose of elucidating Khazar history to outsiders but is rather an appeal for money from the Jews of Kiev to Jews abroad. Such letters of petition were not uncommon. If they had to ransom a relative, or gather funds for some philanthropic endeavor, enterprising Jews traveled with a letter (or had the letter circulated for them) to raise funds.

The letter begins with a series of stock phrases common in Medieval Jewish correspondence, and with the conclusion of these flourishes, the tale starts: "[W]e the community of Kiev, (hereby) inform you of the troublesome affair of this (man) Mar Jacob ben R. Hanukkah. . . ."⁴⁷ This man's brother, the letter explains, borrowed money from gentiles, and while traveling on a road, was killed, and the money stolen. Following this incident, creditors came and took the borrower's brother Jacob captive. He was kept for a year while the community of Kiev raised sixty coins. However, forty coins remained on the balance. The letter ends with some more flourishes, seeks the redemption of Mar Jacob ben R. Hanukkah, and is signed by several men: Abraham the Parnas, a fragment of a name, [. . .] Jel bar MNS, Reuben bar GWSTT bar KYBR Kohen, Simson, Judah, called SWRTH, Hanukkah bar Moses, QWFYN bar Joseph, MNR bar Samuel Kohen, Judah bar Isaac Levite, Sinai bar Samuel, and Isaac the Parnas. Then follows in runes (an early Turkic alphabet): HWQWRWM, which is translated "I have read it."⁴⁸

The capitalized letters above are Turkic names, each letter representing one Hebrew consonant. One of the things that astonished Golb about the letter was that all the Hebrew names signed at the bottom were from the Pentateuch, that is, they originated from what is known in the Hebrew tradition as the Tanakh, which is an acronym for the traditional threefold division of the Bible. He also noted that the other Hebrew names in the Kievan Letter are seldom used as personal names in other Jewish communities. The name Hanukkah was also found as a personal name in King Joseph's Reply. Apparently, the Khazarian Jews may have named their children after Jewish holidays and important place names in the Bible. King Joseph's Reply and the Kievan Letter shows that both Khazar kings and commoners preferred Biblical Hebrew names to names found

in other Jewish texts, like the Talmud. This affinity between the two documents suggested to Golb that the Khazars in the Kievan Letter were converts to Judaism, who at one time adopted Jewish customs largely based on a reading of the Tanakh, or the Hebrew Bible, and took names which they found there. Only later did they adopt Rabbinical Judaism in earnest. The same custom was suggested by King Joseph's Reply and the Schechter Letter.

The Kievan Letter implied that the Khazars did not discontinue their tribal-Turkic customs once they adopted Judaism. Several Turkic names are on its list, often with accompanying Hebrew ones, suggesting that some sort of accommodation took place between the old Khazar life and their adoption of Judaism. Interestingly, the term *kohen*, or priest, is appended first to a purely Khazarian name, and then to a Hebrew-Khazarian combination. Unlike the other official titles in the letter, like *parnas* (which means "benefactor" or a provider of funds and social services for a Jewish community in the Islamic world), a Levite held a strictly inherited position. The conjunction of a pure Khazar name, and a mixed Hebrew and Khazar name with the title *kohen*, suggests that some early converts to Judaism in Khazaria may have been Turkic priests of the Tengri animistic religion known as *qams*.⁴⁹ When the Khazars converted to Judaism, the Tengri priests converted as well and adopted the terms *kohen* and *levite*, even though they were not direct descendants of Jewish priests. Interestingly, King Joseph's Reply states that a tabernacle was created by his ancestor, King Bulan. Animal sacrifice may have occurred in this Khazar tabernacle, administered by these *qams/kohens*. Finally, the runes, or Turkic letters at the conclusion of the text which read "I have read it" probably were written by a Khazarian official charged with reading documents. This certification of the Kievan Letter enabled the writers (or their representatives) permission to travel abroad. The official was clearly conversant in both Hebrew and Khazarian Turkic.

These three documents—King Joseph's Reply, the Schechter Letter, and the Kievan Letter—allow the Khazars to speak with their own voice. But equally compelling has been some recent evidence from archeology. Crimea tombstones believed to be of Khazarian origin show evidence of the slow adoption of Jewish burial customs. Some tombstones were engraved with symbols which are unmistakably Jewish: a menorah, and a shofar, or the staff of Aaron. But on the other side, many stones bear tribal symbols such as *tamga*, which are composed of varied geometrical shapes. Other recently excavated Khazarian graves suggest that Jewish customs had infiltrated all of Khazaria and were not simply a custom among the Khazar kings, court, and nobility. The Kievan Letter, written

by rank-and-file Khazar Jews, further supports this theory, suggesting that Judaism may have been present in the kingdom far beyond the king, his court, and the nobility. Importantly, there was no check on conversion activity in Khazaria. In most Christian and Islamic lands at this time, it was forbidden for Jews to convert gentiles to Judaism. In Khazaria, there was no such inhibitory force.⁵⁰

In fact, as the religion of the noble elite, a commoner's conversion to Judaism would have borne numerous benefits. Although it seemed the Khazar kings did not press their religion on their subjects, and in general maintained a tolerant attitude toward other faiths, one incident reported by ibn Fadlan (an Arab chronicler we will meet below) indicates otherwise. He wrote that in 922 CE a Khazar king learned that Muslims had destroyed a synagogue in Dar al-Babunaj, and he retaliated by destroying the minaret on the Friday mosque in the Khazarian capital of Itil and killing the muezzins or the individuals who called Muslims to prayer at the mosque. Fadlan explained that it was only fear of further retaliation on synagogues and Jews abroad that prevented the Khazar king from leveling the mosque entirely.⁵¹ So, at least in this one incident (which we cannot tell whether was typical or not) the Khazar kings expressed a pan-Jewish gesture of loyalty. For the Khazars, the adoption of Judaism may have been part of a process of political centralization. Judaism and the strengthening of a single state controlled by one monarchy went hand in glove.⁵²

MANY SHEEP, HONEY, AND JEWS: THE KHAZARS THROUGH ARAB EYES

As we saw, Hasdai ibn Shaprut took such a keen interest in the Khazarian Jewish Kingdom that he wrote a letter to its king and received a response. It appears that he also received additional correspondence from Khazarian Jews, since the Schechter Letter had many of the characteristics of Hasdai's diplomatic communication. Hasdai, as a man who moved in high diplomatic circles, knew full well the value of a Jewish king and a Jewish state. The Jewish world was interested in the Khazars, and certain key figures in the Medieval Jewish world were familiar with them. The most famous, as we said, was Judah HaLevi (1085-1141 CE), a poet and philosopher writing in Spain just after the fall of the Jewish Khazar Kingdom. He featured the Khazars in his polemical dialogue *The Kuzari*. In what was primarily a theological and philosophical work, HaLevi was not concerned with the actual history of the Khazars. He used them

mostly as a backdrop for his own theological goals. However, HaLevi had knowledge of the Khazars and their history, which can be found scattered through his long work. He knew the tale of the Torah scrolls hidden away in the cave, though he told it in a version slightly different than that in the Schechter Letter. HaLevi's knowledge of the Khazars suggests a wider familiarity among Muslims and Jews in the lands of Islam. Perhaps well-known stories circulated about this Turkic people who converted to Judaism among Arab-speaking Jews and Muslims.

The Khazars were known to the Arabs and Jews dwelling in Islamic lands because the Khazars bordered Islam's furthest northern advance out of the Middle East. Much has been written about the Arab-Khazar Wars, which occurred in two main phases starting around 641 CE and lasted a little less than a hundred years.⁵³ The Khazar check on Arab expansion to the north has been compared to the defeat of Arab armies by the Franks at Tours, France, in 732 CE. The Khazars, seeking to maintain their political and religious independence, fought a series of campaigns against the Arabs. In the hundred years of armed struggles, the Khazars were often the invaders of Arab territory, and sometimes the defenders of their own land against Arab armies, as the tides of war shifted back and forth. At one time, it appeared Khazaria would be overcome by the invading Arabs. But conditions thwarted the Arabs. The Caucasus are a mountainous region, extremely cold and inhospitable in the winter, and the Muslim armies, when not defeated by the Khazars, were given a drubbing by the snow. Khazaria was a vast land, and Arab armies often had difficulty securing and holding their conquests. One Arab writer, expressing a certain amount of disdain, described Khazaria as a difficult land with "many sheep, honey and Jews."⁵⁴

By the mid-700s, both the Khazars and the Arabs had more or less ended their conflict because of a different challenge that was common to both. During this time, a new enemy emerged from the north. Invaders from Scandinavia began to infiltrate the land that would soon be known as Russia. They were called the Vikings, or Norse, in the west, and the Rus in the east. This restless people colonized Iceland in 870 CE, Greenland in 986 CE, and even landed in the New World a full five hundred years before Columbus, creating winter camps in what is now Nova Scotia. The Norse invaded and colonized parts of England, Ireland, and northern France. In some places, including Iceland and Greenland, they maintained their traditional Scandinavian language and customs. But in France they adopted the language of the native people and were called Normans. The Normans conquered England in 1066 CE and invaded and eventually conquered Sicily, wresting it from Arab control in armed conflicts from

1060 to 1091 CE. In the east, the Rus traveled from the Baltics through the river systems of western Russia. They quickly established control of a significant swatch of modern western Russia. In most places, Rus princes and warlords began to lose their distinctive Norse identity and adopted the Slavic languages of the region. As the Rus began to press south into Khazar lands, the Arabs and the Khazars faced a joint threat.

King Joseph's Reply explains that the Khazars kept the Rus from entering the lands of Islam. At this time, the Khazar Kingdom may have acted as the bulwark against Rus expansion to the south. The Khazars could focus on the growing menace to the north, to the benefit of both the Khazars and the Caliphate. It was during this time of relative peace between the Arabs and the Khazars that we get another glimpse of the Khazarian Jewish kingdom in a way that is different from the "Jewish" Hebrew documents we have already discussed. Arab diplomats and merchants traveled to Khazaria to shore up the Khazar-Arab alliance and to open lucrative trade routes between the Middle East and the Caucuses. Written travel accounts were immensely popular during the Middle Ages, both in Christendom and the lands of Islam. In a time when few people traveled far, accounts from diplomats and merchants who did venture further than their native cities had an obvious appeal. Several Arab travel chronicles exist of journeys to the Kingdom of the Khazars, and they give a decidedly different picture than the snapshot from King Joseph's Reply, the Schechter Letter, and the Kievan Letter.

An early Arab account about the Khazars was written by Ahmed ibn Fadlan, who traveled through Khazaria in 922 CE on an embassy from the Caliph in Baghdad to the king of the Bulgarians, whose kingdom lay over the Volga adjacent to Khazaria. Fadlan wrote that "Khazar is the name of a certain country, of which the capital is called Ital."⁵⁵ He explains that Ital is also the name of the river that flows through the city (now called the Volga River.) The city is divided into western and eastern parts that are divided by the river. The Khazar royalty live on the western bank, and this portion of the city is surrounded by a wall. The few buildings in this part of Ital are composed of brick, for only the royalty are allowed to dwell in brick buildings. In the eastern part of the city, most of the dwellings are made of mud, and there are a number of market places and baths. Fadlan explains that one hundred thousand Muslims and thirty mosques could be found there. The king of the Khazars is a Jew and has four thousand retainers attached to him. Although the king and his court are Jewish, they are a minority in the kingdom. Most are Muslims and Christians, and the rest, Fadlan claims, are idolaters—most likely a diverse group composed of Slavic and Rus pagans and some Khazars still practicing the shaman-

istic religion of their ancestors. The king collects his revenues from tithes levied on merchandise from trade on every highway, sea, and river. The people of the realm pay land taxes and taxes on goods bought or sold. For the administration of laws, the Khazar king employs nine judges chosen from the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and pagans of the realm. When there is a dispute, the case is taken to this court and on the day of judgment an intermediary goes back and forth between the judges and the king, since custom dictates that the judges (and indeed, as we will see below, no one else) are not permitted to see the king.

Fadlan provides a glimpse of life for the common people of Khazaria. The city of Itil has no villages. The fields of the citizens are scattered over a large area, and in the summer the townspeople go out to sow their fields. When the crops are ripe, they harvest them and load them in wagons or ships. The greater part of the food is rice and fish. The Khazar people are of two types, Fadlan explains: the Kara Khazars, or the Black Khazars, who have a complexion so dark they resemble Indians, and those of a whiter complexion, known for their "beauty and symmetry."⁵⁶

Fadlan continues that the supreme king of the Khazars, known as the great Kakan, or Khagan, never appears in public. He has a viceroy called the Bek, who commands the armies, administers the affairs of the state, appears in public, and wages war. Every day the Bek consults the Khagan with the proper air of respect: barefoot, he holds a stick in his hand, and after he salutes him, he burns the stick in his presence. Then the Bek sits on his own throne next to the Khagan, and they discuss matters of state. Fadlan also explains in some detail the funerary customs of the Khazar King, and he writes of the large number of wives married to the king and his stable of concubines. Fadlan maintains that when the sovereign goes out in public (and most likely the Bek was meant here, since the Khagan remains always in seclusion) a whole army marches out with him. When his subjects see him, they fall on their faces in reverence and do not raise their heads until he has gone. The Khagan's reign is set at forty years. If he exceeds this term "by even one day"⁵⁷ his citizens and courtiers put him to death for the alleged reason that his mental powers are ". . . decayed and his wisdom impaired."⁵⁸

Fadlan's account contains extraordinary elements. If we had only Hebrew documents from Khazaria, we would be quite justified in concluding that the primary constituency of the Kingdom was Jewish. In both the legends told about Khazaria's origins in King Joseph's Letter and the Schechter Letter, the relationship between Judaism, Jewish customs, and the Khazars was viewed as quite old, enduring, and widespread. But Fadlan's account downplays and even denigrates the Jewish element in the

Khazar state. He stresses the religious pluralism of Khazaria, pointing out that this diversity was recognized by the Khazar kings, who appointed a panel of nine judges from each of these faiths to settle disputes. He also documents in great detail some customs of the Khazar kings which had no precedent in “normative” Judaism. For instance, there is no analog in Jewish history for a dual kingship. And of course, the most extraordinary deviation from Jewish precedent was the alleged ritual killing of the Khazar king at the conclusion of his forty-year reign. The ritual killing of a king was a practice that had a wide range, and Sir James Frazer’s multivolume *The Golden Bough* examines a multitude of examples of ritual regicide the world over—but in Jewish history there is no parallel.

Yet another Arab writer, El-Mas’udi, wrote of the Khazars in his book *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Stones* in 943–944 CE. Mas’udi had widely traveled through India, China, Madagascar, and the region of the Caspian Sea. He wrote of the Khazars, reiterating much of what Fadlan wrote, with some additions and alterations. Like Fadlan, he stresses the Muslim presence in Khazaria. Most of the king’s troops, he explains, are Muslim, and the kingdom is deeply influenced by the large Muslim community, which lived in Khazaria since the early days of Islam. They have a great public mosque, whose minaret, significantly, rises above the king’s palace. Regarding the king and his ritual murder, Mas’udi claims he is shut up in his palace and never makes a public procession or appears to any of his nobility or people. But if a drought or other misfortune occurs in Khazaria, the people of the nation can run to the king and claim, “the administration of this Khagan has brought misfortune upon us: put him to death, or deliver him to us, that we may kill him.”⁵⁹ Mas’udi writes that a king then would sometimes deliver up the Khagan for execution or perform the execution himself. Mas’udi’s account differs from that of Fadlan, who gives the king forty years until he is executed. Mas’udi’s account places the Khagan in far greater jeopardy: if any military or natural misfortune occurs in Khazaria, he is held accountable and immediately murdered.

Yet another version of the ritual killing of the Khazar king was given by the Arab author Abul-Cassim Mohammad ibn Haulkali, in his *Book of Itineraries and of the Provinces*. He wrote that when a prince is raised to the Khaganship, they bring him forth and tie a piece of silk around his throat so tightly that he can hardly breathe. At this moment he is asked how long he will hold his sovereignty, to which he answers, “so many years.” He is then installed as Khagan, and if he does not die before the stated number of years, he is put to death.⁶⁰

The custom of killing the Khazar Khagan, in these three different versions, was mentioned nowhere in the Hebrew documents of the Khazars.

It is possible that these Arab sources are based on faulty information. The ritual killing of the king is known from other western Turkish groups, but the Khazars may very well have ceased to perform this custom after they became Jews. Yet, interestingly, neither is the double kingship of the Khagan-Bek mentioned in King Joseph's Reply to Hasdai ibn Shaprut. There the king simply supplies the line of succession from King Bulan to King Joseph with no mention of a double monarchy. The Schechter Letter comes close to describing some sort of fluid relationship of the kingship in Khazaria. The king is chosen because of his strength and prowess in battle. But of course, there is no mention of either a double kingship or regicide. So what are we to make of this discrepancy? Is there any way to reconcile both sides of the story? Perhaps the Khazars were eager to show only their Judaism to Jews but continued to practice ancestral customs involving the ritual slaughter of the Khagan? The Arab sources unanimously agreed that the Khagan and Bek were Jews, as were the royal families from whom the Khagan was chosen. Is the story of the regicide of the Khagan simply Muslim propaganda against the Jewish Kingdom of Khazaria, whose Jewish coloration was, perhaps, insulting to many Muslims?

Just like the stories about the origins of Judaism in Khazaria that we find in King Joseph's Letter and the Schechter Letter, the tales told about the double kingship of the Khazars and the regicide of the Khagan may have some basis in truth. Certainly, the ritual killing of a king is well-known from other Turkic groups. And the reasons cited by the Arab sources for the regicide of the Khagan are consistent with the practice in other cultures: the Khagan was viewed as the physical symbol of the vitality of the realm. When he grew old, his state could very well find itself reflected in decreased fertility of the land and military safety of the nation. His ritual sacrifice and replacement placated whatever power tied the Khagan with the state and its welfare, and his more rigorous successor insured that fertility would be restored. The fact that the Khagan was kept a virtual captive in the palace further reinforces this: He was not allowed to travel or to see anyone but a few select retainers. These safeguards were practiced not only to keep track of his whereabouts if his murder was requested, but also to insure that the sanctity that was afforded to his body was not breached. He was held captive because he was the physical embodiment of the kingdom and the land. When his power waned, that body was disposed of and another took its place.⁶¹

If this was in fact a practice of the Jewish Khazar royals, how did they reconcile it with Rabbinical Judaism, which they professed in King Joseph's Reply, the Schechter Letter, and the Kievan Letter? If the Khazars

felt a cultural harmonization was necessary at all, they probably engaged a similar mechanism to that employed during the emergence of Judaism among diverse *ayhud* peoples in Ethiopia. Khazarian Judaism was a local expression of Judaism, for all its Rabbinical trappings, and while having considerable points of contact with Rabbinical Judaism, it may also have had many divergences. Khazarian Jews most likely adapted the local customs they practiced before the adoption of Judaism and fit them into the mold of the new faith.⁶²

Unfortunately, little is left of the unique heritage of Khazarian Judaism. Khazaria was defeated by the Russians in a series of military campaigns that began, significantly, with the capture of Kiev in 862 CE, and ended with the virtual elimination of Khazar sovereignty in 1016 CE, when the last Khazar king, named Georgius Tzul (judging by his first name, apparently a Christian), was imprisoned by the Rus. Then memory of the Khazars was all but lost until the beginning of the twentieth century, with the discovery of the Hebrew documentary evidence outlined at the beginning of this chapter.⁶³

TWO PICTURES OF THE KHAZARS

So what, exactly, was the Khazar Jewish Kingdom? Was it a medieval, Rabbinical expression of Judaism at home in the traditional books and texts of Judaism like the Talmud and the Mishnah, or was it an expression of a more Turkic tribal past, where ritual regicide was openly condoned and practiced? The layers of myth and legend surrounding the Khazar accounts of their own Jewish origins are so thick that we are uncertain of the truth of any single account. But certainly their general outlines are correct: through time, the Khazar kings, and perhaps a sizable portion of their subjects, adopted Judaism. Through the years, this expression of Judaism came more under the influence of other Jewish groups, as foreign Jews began to settle in a kingdom where Jews were free to practice their religion (and were even the prestige religion). No doubt, when Jews from the lands of Islam and Byzantium began to arrive in Khazaria, either as merchants or for religious freedom or both, Judaism as practiced in the kingdom was transformed. But what of the killing of the Khagan? Are we dealing here with faulty Arab sources, based on old information about Turkic ritual practice, or did the custom actually continue after Rabbinical Judaism was firmly adopted in Khazaria? It is an extremely difficult question to answer. If we believe the Arab accounts, this practice was a solid fixture of the Khazar state. The dual kingship and the killing of the

Khagan were the foundation of political power in Khazaria. Could this practice be reconciled with Rabbinical Judaism? Perhaps so. As shown by the Kievan Letter, Turkic and Hebrew names and titles continued to be simultaneously used among Khazaria's Jews. So it is equally conceivable that the killing of the king was continued, even when the King of the Khazars carried the scepter of Judah.

FIVE

AND JEWS WERE INDEPENDENT OF ANY GENTILE YOKE: THE JEWISH TRIBES OF THE HIJAZ AND THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF HIMYAR (YEMEN)

THE DREAM OF A GREATER JEWISH STATE

A land bridge joins the Arabian Peninsula to the Land of Israel, and from very ancient times the two have been culturally interconnected. Jews have dwelled in Arabia since antiquity and continued to do so in great numbers in southern Arabia, in the country of Yemen, until the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. Operation Magic Carpet brought some forty thousand Yemeni Jews to Israel between June 1949 and September 1950. British and American transport planes made over three hundred flights from Yemen to Israel in an operation which was kept secret and details of which were not released until nearly a year later. After the founding of the State of Israel, many Jewish communities in Muslim countries came under increasing pressure and in some cases, suffered violence. After the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states was declared by the United Nations in 1947, rioters in Yemen killed over eighty Jews and destroyed Jewish homes and businesses. In 1948 the accusation that Yemeni Jews had ritually murdered two Yemeni gentile girls led to more rioting and looting. The Jewish communities of Yemen, already laboring under poverty and marginalization in a poor country, found themselves facing great peril.¹

At the conclusion of Operation Magic Carpet, most of Yemen's Jews were relocated to Israel. They were the first sizable population of Jews from a non-European country to live in Israel. They faced years of discrimination in Israel and were unable to secure well-paying jobs, decent housing, and access to higher education. Despite their hardships, the Yemeni Jews held fast to an ancient and impressive lineage. They maintained unique religious traditions found nowhere else in the Jewish world, including an unusual pronunciation of Hebrew. And they were different in another important way: they shared with the Beta Israel a

historical memory and abiding myth of their own ancestral political independence. In fact, a part of this actual, real life independence survived well into modern times. A group of Jews known as the Chabani tribe was discovered in the 1980s in the barren and disputed border region between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.² These Jews lived semi-independent lives in Yemen's harsh interior, and their customs harkened back to the age of Jewish political freedom in Arabia. That age occurred in two distinct phases: in the Jewish Kingdom of Himyar (the ancient name for Yemen) in the fourth century CE and among the various tribes of Jews who lived in the Hijaz, in northern Arabia, in the two or three centuries before the emergence of Islam in the seventh century CE. These other Zions, so close to the Land of Israel, provide a tantalizing glimpse of Jewish autonomy close to and yet far from the dream of Zion and the Land of Israel.

ARABIA FELIX

The ancient Roman term for Arabia, which was affixed to maps with only a fleeting knowledge of actual geography, is *Arabia Felix*, or "Prosperous Arabia." This name was somewhat ironic, as few lands have been more proscribed by harsh climate and geography than Arabia. And it remains one of the few land masses that has never known a full-scale invasion by a foreign army. The reason is simple: the land is so unremittingly harsh, that to enter it from the outside with little knowledge of its terrain and its difficult physical conditions is a death sentence. At one-and-a-half-million square miles (about the size of Europe or India), Arabia receives less than eight inches of rain a year. And although there is evidence that Arabia was wetter in the past, by the Common Era it was a land of great tracts of deserts, punctuated here and there by relatively small oases. Of course, even near the oases, where water was in relative abundance, irrigation was necessary to grow crops. Arabia's precipitation comes mostly from moisture from the Indian Ocean to the south and from humidity from the Persian Gulf to the east. The interior and western part, known as the Hijaz, is largely dry with the exception of important oasis areas.³

Yet Arabia was coveted by the great powers of antiquity. The south of Arabia was known as a lucrative producer of frankincense and myrrh, which are familiar to most as two of the three presents the Magi give to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.⁴ These rare and precious spices were grown in a narrow belt of land in southern Arabia and coastal east Africa and were much in demand in many parts of the world as key components in the production of incense. Despite its harsh climate, Arabia had contact

with the outside world and even if it was never completely conquered by such powerful ancient states as Persia, Rome, or later, Byzantium, it certainly saw a measure of influence from those cultures. In the thousand years before the rise of Islam in Arabia, the land was a crossroad of many peoples and many religions that left deep imprints on the natives of the land in every facet of life, from physical and religious culture, to social and political organization. An early Jewish presence existed in Arabia in nearly every corner of the peninsula but particularly in the more settled south. With the rise of Christianity, Christians arrived in Arabia, coming overland with caravan camels from the north, or through seaports to the south, as both missionaries and merchants.

Despite the presence of many foreign influences, Arabia had a strong native culture. In ancient times, before the beginning of the Christian era, Arabia was home to diverse peoples speaking several languages. But with time, Arabia became predominantly Arabic speaking. The Arabs, who were only one group in the mosaic of peoples who lived there, took on an increasingly important religious, social, and linguistic role in the land. By the time of the Jewish historian Josephus (37–100 CE), dominant Arab rulers were mentioned in Roman and Greek accounts. At this time inscriptions began to appear in Arabia which featured the Arabic language, which is a Semitic tongue cognate with Hebrew and Aramaic. Before Islam, Arabia had a strong pagan tradition, which centered around a pantheon of gods and goddesses, the veneration and worship of ancestors, and visits to sacred sites and shrines devoted to gods or goddesses.⁵ Arabs practiced magic to control the elements, to cure disease and sterility, and to control fortunes. A host of feast days and festivals were widely observed all around the peninsula, and offerings of food to the gods and goddesses were made on these days, as well as on all days at certain popular sacred sites. Pagan Arabian religion displayed some local variation, but like many pagan polytheistic cultures, a closer look reveals a conservative religious background. Behind the profusion of names and places, certain standard motifs can be observed. In those areas with a great deal of urban centralization, such as the south, the pantheons tended to be larger, reflecting the greater complexity of social organization. In sparsely settled areas where nomadic Bedouins lived, the pantheons were smaller, reflecting a less complex and diversified lifestyle.

Until the fourth century, nearly all the inhabitants of Arabia were polytheists. But then monotheism, or the belief in one God and the denial of other gods, began to infiltrate Arabia. Of course, monotheistic ideas held by Jewish or Christian communities were also practiced by their respective Arabian converts. But in the decades preceding Islam there was also

a native monotheistic movement led by various groups of *hunafa* who eschewed Arabian polytheism for some form (or forms) of monotheism. Christianity, Judaism, and the *hunafa* were instrumental in the formation of Islam in the seventh century.

In the following chapter, we will concentrate on the Jewish elements in Arabia, with an eye to groups who were independent and self-ruling. There were two groups of Jews who were independent in Arabia before the arrival of Islam. One consisted of loosely connected tribes of Jews who lived in northwest Arabia, in the strip of land adjacent to the Red Sea known as the Hijaz. This area is famous for containing the two holiest cities in the Islamic tradition: Mecca and Medina. The other was the Kingdom of Himyar (the ancient name of Yemen) in the southwestern corner of Arabia, which was bordered on the west by the Red Sea, the south by the Indian Ocean, and the north by the nearly impenetrable Al-Rub’al Khali Desert. But in order to understand the special nature of Jewish sovereignty in this land, we need to explore the tribal nature of Arabian society prior to the rise of Islam.

TRIBES, BEDOUINS, AND CITY DWELLERS

Before Islam, Arabian society was primarily tribal except in the extreme south. There, where Arabs came into contact with other cultures, the idea of a nation-state took root. Cultural influences permeated the ports to the south and to an extent the oases to the north, and Arab homegrown political dynasties developed. In the north, the most famous was that of the Nabateans. Their great civilization borrowed heavily from Greek and Roman culture, and the lasting survival of their physical accomplishments remain as the splendid ruins of Petra in the Jordanian desert.⁶ In the south, several states in Yemen were able to survive and compete against Greek and Roman cultures, while absorbing some of their influences. One such state was Himyar, which we will explore below.⁷

But beyond these relatively small areas, the rest of Arabia was not organized around any larger political entity than the tribe. The smallest unit of the tribe was the family, composed of a man, a woman (or in some cases more than one woman), and children. From there, the extended family was organized into a clan, and blood relationships moved outward from there. Generally, tribes were organized around blood ties. Ancient Arab culture prized linguistic adroitness and public recitation of poems and odes. This same skill was used to preserve the record of intricate genealogies. The ability to tell who was a relation was of paramount importance in pre-Islamic Arabia. Alliances could rise or fall on such data.

One may think that in such a loosely organized culture, warfare and civil strife were rampant. But this was far from the case. The threat of tribal retaliation for individual wrongdoing prevented social chaos. Ancient Arabs realized that their individual actions had repercussions for themselves, their relatives, and their tribe members. Grouped with a firm tradition of inter-tribal holidays, a rigorous code of hospitality, and a strong culture of mutual gift-giving, this made tribal Arabia a place where a firm code of conduct ruled even in the absence of the enforcing power of a centralized state.

Tribes were not just found among the Bedouin nomads outside towns in Arabia. In central and northern Arabia, tribes were also ubiquitous in towns and oasis settlements. Most large towns, including Mecca and Medina (also called Yathrib) in the Hijaz, had founding or leading tribes. Often, these tribes were in alliance with each other against rivals and in the Hijaz, this became a very important component in the rise of Islam. Muslims familiar with the Islamic tradition know this, since the machinations of the tribes of Medina were one of the first large, organized elements of resistance with which Mohammad and the early members of his new religion had to contend.⁸

THE JEWS FIND AN ARABIAN HOME

Jews began to settle Arabia quite early, and a host of legends grew up around their entry into the peninsula. One centered around the Queen of Sheba, whom we encountered in the legends regarding the Jewish presence in Ethiopia.⁹ Her general “southern” provenance led some to consider her a Queen of Himyar, or Yemen. Jews lived in that country from an early date and were certainly present in large numbers after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Other legends with wide circulation concerned the displaced Israelites, lost during the forty years of wandering in the desert with Moses, who settled in the oases of Arabia. These legends pointed to a connection between Arabia and the Jews—ties that were bound by geography and culture. Certainly, historically verifiable influxes of Jews in Arabia began after the First Jewish Revolt against Rome from 66–73 CE, and the Second Jewish Revolt, or the Bar Kokhba Revolt, from 132–135 CE. Then, a great number of displaced Jews were on the move, and some settled in the oases of northern Arabia. Arabia, long a place on the “margins” of more settled and climatically congenial lands, became a haven for refugees and the persecuted. As a result, Jewish inscriptions were increasingly found dating from the first century of the Common Era in different parts of Arabia.¹⁰

Soon, the Jews of Arabia became acclimatized to their new land. Jews began to use Arabic names, which is firm evidence of the adoption of the Arabic language as the mode of their daily communication. Tribalization, which was in evidence everywhere in Arabia, but particularly in the north, also affected the Jews. Jewish groups formed clans and tribes, probably around the same blood and domestic patterns that bound Arabs together. They formed alliances—often with other Jewish tribes and sometimes with Arab tribes. In general, they were probably little different in appearance, dress, and social customs from their Arab pagan neighbors (with the exception, of course, of the practice of their unique religion). Jews occupied most economic and social niches in pre-Islamic Arabian society. They were Bedouins who migrated with their flocks throughout the year. They were townspeople and craftsmen. But disproportionately, the Jews of northern Arabia, and especially in the Hijaz, were associated with large-scale agricultural production. With so little rainfall, cultivation is nearly impossible in Arabia without a system of irrigation. Before the arrival of large number of Jews into the Hijaz, there were few Arabs who engaged in agriculture. But the Jews who settled in northern Arabia



Figure 5.1. Khaybar I

*Contemporary photograph of the ruins of the Jewish fortress at Khaybar.
Courtesy of photographer Silvija Seres.*



Figure 5.2. Khaybar II

Contemporary photograph of the ruins of the Jewish fortress at Khaybar.
Courtesy of photographer Silvija Seres.

brought irrigation techniques, and soon sizable Jewish agricultural settlements were established and grew the lucrative crop of dates in the oases of the Hijaz.

There had always been tension in Arabia between people living in towns or established oases and Bedouins who wandered about the deserts with their flocks in search of water and pasturage. The relationship between these two groups was complex, by turns cordial and aggressive. In response to Bedouin pressure, the settled peoples in Arabia constructed fortresses and walls around their towns and fields. In a land without a central government, such tribal towns and oasis centers acted as independent states. They maintained their own armies or self-defense forces, and they conducted treaties with other tribes for mutual defense and trade. The Jews of the large oasis of Khaybar protected their possessions with an impressive fortress atop a hillside (the ruins of which still exist today),¹¹ and they governed their own internal affairs without interference from outside powers. The same was the case within larger towns as well, as we will see below when we look at the Jewish tribes of Medina.

If the Jews of Arabia were influenced by their Arab environment, Jewish influences moved toward the pagan Arabs as well. A host of words of Aramaic origin entered the Arabic language through Jewish influence. Words from agriculture, along with words of a theological and homiletical nature, which were largely absent from pre-Islam Arabic, were Arabized and became such, standard Arabic that they even made their way into the Qur'an.¹² The most famous was the newer name of the town of Yathrib: "Medina"—which means "city" or "principality" in Aramaic. Yathrib itself had been settled by Jews for centuries before the birth of Mohammad. It was a desert oasis town and was given over primarily to agriculture and trade. Jews appear to have been the dominant population in the city and may have even founded it.

MOHAMMAD'S WARS WITH THE JEWS OF HIJAZ

The most famous Arab Jewish tribes in the Muslim world are those mentioned in Islamic tradition. They had a profound effect on the early years of Mohammad, and subsequently on Islam. When Mohammad was invited by the warring citizens of Medina to settle in their city and adjudicate their disputes in return for political power, there were three large, powerful Jewish tribes residing in the city. They were named, in order of importance, the *Banu Nadir*, *Banu Qurayza*, and *Banu Qaynuqa*.¹³ The first two were priestly tribes, called *al-kahinan*. The name came from the Arabized version of *kohen*, or priest in Hebrew, and *Banu Harun*, or sons of Aaron, which implies that their ancestors were priests who fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the Second Temple.¹⁴ Together with two pagan Arab tribes called the *Banu Aus* and the *Banu Khazraj*, they were the dominant factions of the city and formed alliances with each other. A long struggle existed wherein the Jewish tribes *Nadir* and *Qurayza* sided with the Arab tribe *Aus*, while the Jewish tribe *Qaynuqa* sided with the Arab *Khazraj*. So the quest for power was not divided along religious lines but developed according to the dictates of geography and economic competition.

The battles continued for years, until eventually all sides were exhausted by the conflict. The *Aus* and the *Khazraj*—two of the pagan Arab tribes—invited Mohammad to Medina to act as the chief magistrate in the city. As the leader of a new religion, he had developed a reputation in northern Arabia for his astute political gifts as well as his religious charisma. Mohammad negotiated with the Arab pagans of Medina and in June 622 CE, seventy-five Medinese Arabs accepted Islam and swore

allegiance to its Prophet. The Jews of Medina had no part in the negotiations that brought the Prophet to the city, and this fact was to have grave consequences for the Jews of the Hijaz. When Mohammad arrived from Mecca in September of 622 CE, the situation in the city was delicate. Although influential Arabs had converted to the new religion, the bulk of the Arabs within the city were still practicing polytheists. The core group of Muslims accompanying Mohammad was small. Hence, Mohammad acted with political circumspection. He drafted a document meant to outline the rights and responsibilities of the Medinese under his rule. He recognized the Jews as members of the community of Medina with certain rights but included a clause stating that if the Jews acted wrongfully, their rights would be revoked.¹⁵ Some of the Jews of Medina ridiculed the Prophet and his religion. For many centuries scholars have noted the differences between the Qur'an's statements and assertions about Jews in the earlier Mecca period when Mohammad had little direct contact with Jews, and so the doctrines he promulgated were more pointedly Jewish (like facing Jerusalem during prayer), and the later Medina prophecies, which tend to be more anti-Jewish and which were written when he faced Jewish resistance. But without a significant military victory over the pagan Arabs of Mecca who were Mohammad's main enemy, there was little he could do about Medina's influential and powerful Jews.

But an opportunity came in the battle of Badr in 624 CE, during which Mohammad defeated the Quraish tribe of Mecca. Flush with victory, Mohammad had assassinated two pagan poets who had lampooned him in verse. Then he moved against the weakest Jewish tribe in Medina, the *Banu Qaynuqa*, which was composed of craftsmen and artisans. After a short siege of their fortress, the tribe surrendered unconditionally. Mohammad was not in the position to do with the *Qaynuqa* as he wished, and the ruler of their former pagan Arab ally petitioned Mohammad for mercy, which he granted. The *Banu Qaynuqa* were allowed to leave Medina with their property, and neither of the other Jewish tribes of Medina came to their aid. Those tribes did not understand the nature of the conflict and failed to realize that a new social, political, and religious phenomenon was about to sweep Arabia and in the process, all but destroy their political independence and eventually wipe their very presence from the map of Arabia.

When Mohammad decided to move against the next Jewish tribe, the *Nadir*, they appeared to realize they were in danger. They attempted to enlist the aid of their old Arab allies, and when that assistance failed to materialize, they negotiated a peace with the Prophet and were allowed to leave Medina with their portable wealth. Islamic sources explain that

they departed ostentatiously, and without humility, despite their defeat. With a train of six hundred camels they left for the Jewish fortress-oasis of Khaybar. The confiscation of the *Nadir*'s unmovable property and land effectively left Mohammad financially independent.¹⁶

Mohammad now had to turn his attention to the last Jewish tribe in Medina, the *Banu Qurayza*. By this time, the *Qurayza* were fully aware of what fate awaited them, and they acted with a decisiveness the two other Jewish tribes had failed to marshal. When Meccan forces and their Bedouin allies attacked Medina in 627 CE to deliver a fatal blow to Islam, the *Qurayza* decided to lend their support to the Muslims by building defensive trenches in the northern part of the city. But rather than fight in the battle, they remained in their forts, refusing to support either side. In the context of the armed struggle, this was a suspicious move in the eyes of the Muslims. The *Qurayza* even allowed emissaries of the Meccans into their fortress, in order to negotiate their entry into the battle. So on the day when the Meccans turned away from Medina, unable to defeat the Muslim army, Mohammad turned on the *Qurayza*, and attacked their strongholds and fortresses. The siege lasted twenty-five days, and when it was apparent they could not win, the *Qurayza* tried to secure the same surrender terms given to the *Nadir*. But Mohammad no longer had any reason to placate the Jews of Medina, who were no longer powerful. He sought to make an example of the *Qurayza*, perhaps thinking of the conquest of the Jewish oases in the northern Hijaz, and particularly the stronghold of Khaybar, with its impregnable Jewish castle. Mohammad, ever the politician, left the fate of the *Qurayza* in the hands of a trusted deputy, who ordered that all Jewish males be executed, and the women and children sold into slavery. The men of the *Qurayza* were beheaded in the central marketplace, and their bodies were thrown into mass graves. Between six hundred and nine hundred men of the *Qurayza* were executed, with a small fraction of the male members of the tribe being spared through conversion to Islam.¹⁷ A small number of Jews who were not members of the three powerful tribes remained in Medina and its environs for a few years; with Jewish power gone in Medina, Mohammad saw no need to turn his attention to the few Jews who remained.

The last significant Jewish military threat to Mohammad were the Jews in the oases at Khaybar and its vicinity. This rich and fertile land had been a Jewish settlement for many centuries before the rise of Islam, and Mohammad had coveted it because the strong Jewish military force there, swelled by Jewish refugees from Medina, offered a threat to him. Khaybar's abundant date trees and irrigation system were also a source of immense wealth that could strengthen the Muslim community.

First the Jews of Khaybar sought negotiations with the Muslims. When this proved fruitless, they readied for all-out war by joining in an alliance with the Jews of the nearby Fadak oases and with some pagan Bedouin tribes. At first, Mohammad did nothing, and this put the Jews of Khaybar in a relaxed posture. This cost them, for in May 628 CE Mohammad moved against Khaybar, which was not fully ready for the attack. Still, the Jews put up stiff resistance, and the Muslims had to fight fortress by fortress, and at great price to their armies. The Muslims bought off the Bedouin allies of the Jews, so hoped-for reinforcements never arrived. The Jews of Khaybar sued for peace and were allowed to keep their homes and groves in return for providing one-half of their crops to the Muslim community. The Jews who dwelled in the oases of Fadak and Wadi al-Qura followed suit. This “protection money” was not without precedent in Arabia. Often, settled agriculturalists and town dwellers paid Bedouins for their safety. But in the Islamic context, this arrangement set a precedent which would be repeated, with variations and greater legal precision, in any land where Muslim armies conquered Jews and Christians who wished to continue to practice their religion. The *jizya*, which can be translated as “compensation,” is just that: the payment made by Jews and Christians (and in some areas Zoroastrians) to continue practicing their religion in Muslim lands.

THE END OF JEWISH HEGEMONY IN THE HIJAZ

Despite their defeat by the Muslims, Jews remained in northern Arabia after the death of the Prophet and the founding of the Caliphate in 632 CE, but their influence and numbers were vastly diminished. Already linguistically and culturally assimilated, once the Jews lost their political independence, their religious independence was also in jeopardy. The road to conversion to Islam was always open, and some took that path, eliminating the onerous *jizya*, and keeping a greater portion of their wealth. The old centers of Jewish habitation in the Hijaz had become Islamic strongholds, and Jews who remained in northern Arabia eventually moved elsewhere. Some settled in more remote oases, and evidence suggests that they maintained their group identity until the twelfth century.¹⁸

There are other historical indications that Jews remained in Arabia and continued to contact Jews from the outside world. A letter found in that treasure trove of medieval documents, the Cairo Geniza, concerns a Jew named Isaac of Wadi al Kurah, who was from the northern Hijaz at a late date in Muslim rule.¹⁹

However, a far more lasting legacy of the Jews of Arabia existed in the realm of legend and folklore. Perhaps it was the persistent memory of independent Jewish city-states and tribes in the Hijaz that fueled stories well into modern times. Perhaps there were some small groups of Jewish Bedouins who actually continued to practice the nominal independence of Bedouins. Medieval Jewish travelers, always a popular source of such fictions, practiced their art in this part of the world. Benjamin of Tudela, whom we encountered before, told a tale of a mighty Jewish tribe that roamed around Taima and also had several fortified cities, claiming that these “Jews were independent of any gentile yoke.”²⁰ He maintained that they were valiant warriors and went out on raids against their neighbors, securing booty and slaves. In fact, they had no houses at all but lived on caravan plunder, worked the soil, and were cattle drivers. But they did own vast lands, and gave a tithe of their yield to scholars, who dedicated themselves to study, and to the poor of Israel. These Jews were ritually pure, ate no meat, drank no wine, and only wore black clothes to mourn the destruction of the Temple. And they sat and fasted for forty days a year to lament the plight of their coreligionists who were dispersed and oppressed in the world.

Later, in 1488 CE, Obadiah of Bertinoro, whom we encountered before, told a tale about the fierce Jewish tribes of Arabia. He said that the Muslims who traveled through Egypt to Arabia to attend the *hajj* at Mecca had to traverse a large and terrifying desert. They always traveled in massive caravans of some four thousand camels to insure their safety. Even so, they had to contend with “a tribe of formidable giants who spread terror in the land, one of whom can pursue a thousand.” The Muslims called these giants the Arabians of Shadai, or Arabian Sons of God, since before going to battle they pronounced the name of the Almighty. These Sons of God could carry a whole camel on one of their shoulders and could use the other hand to fight an enemy with a dagger. Obadiah explained that these giants were Jewish.²¹

In more recent times, Western travelers have claimed to encounter independent Jewish tribes in Arabia. In the eighteenth century, a Danish traveler observed isolated Jews living in and around Khaybar, as well as “whole tribes”²² in the Hijaz hills ruled by their own Sheiks. By and large, it appears that Jews, in groups or tribes, whether politically independent or not, began to wane in numbers by the eighteenth century. But even in the nineteenth century, reports continued to circulate about “wild” nomadic Jews in Arabia. It is likely that Jewish life became all but untenable in Arabia, particularly in the Hijaz, after the rise and consolidation of the Wahhabi reform movement in Islam in the eighteenth century. This fac-

tion took a dim view of non-Muslims residing in the lands of the Prophet, its most holy sites and its two most sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. But by that time there was probably little formal work to removing Jews from Arabia. Isolation and assimilation had nearly wiped out the Jews of Northern Arabia.

THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF HIMYAR

Southern Arabia had always differed substantially from the north. Early in its history, Arabia's coasts provided easy access to trade routes to Africa and India, while the Hijaz, the desert interior, and the lands bordering the Persian Gulf were more isolated. The south—and particularly Yemen—was in an advantageous position to receive influences from the wider world. Although Yemen's climate was dry and the land mostly desert, the west coast was hot and humid and received beneficial monsoon rains in the summertime, and the western mountains were cooler than the surrounding plains near the sea. So although Yemen was a physically harsh place, relative to the rest of Arabia it enjoyed a far more congenial climate. Mostly, Yemen benefited from the cultivation and trade of frankincense and myrrh. These rare spices were treasured in antiquity and could be grown only along a narrow stretch of land surrounding the Red Sea in southern Arabia and Ethiopia. Trade in these spices put Yemen on the political map, provided it with a source of great wealth, and brought the region to the attention of the outside world.

In the centuries before the rise of Islam, the people of southern Arabia were exposed to traders from Persia and Greece. Under their influence, they developed a greater degree of political and social organization than existed in other portions of Arabia. The various tribes inside Yemen struggled for control of southern Arabia, but eventually the Himyarites, a group whom Pliny described as the "most numerous"²³ of the tribes in southern Arabia, established a state that was to prove stable and long-lasting. Their capital, Zafar, was in the fertile southern highlands, and by the mid-first century CE they were mentioned in a maritime manual of Arabia.²⁴ By 229 CE, Himyar had enough control of southern Arabia that their calendar system began to be employed throughout the region (heralding the arrival of a unified state in Arabia), while the rest of the peninsula retained its tribal character. The Himyarites then set their sights on other parts of Arabia and began a series of military campaigns against the tribes that surrounded them to the north and east, or sometimes simply appeased them through bribes and other compensations. In these ways,

Himyar extended its territory. Himyar's complex social and political organization was reflected by the pantheon of gods and goddesses they worshipped, each of which bore his or her own responsibility in a very nuanced social system.²⁵

Himyar's expansion brought it to the attention of the outside world, and the kingdom soon found itself squeezed between the two superpowers of the sixth century: Byzantium and Persia. Ambassadors were sent from both states to Himyar, and the Byzantines requested that they be allowed to build Christian churches in the realm. In fact, although the majority of the population in Yemen were Arab polytheists, the population was multireligious. Zoroastrians from Persia, Christians from Ethiopia, and a large community of Jews lived there. The Himyar state allowed the church-building as part of its walk on the tightrope between the great powers—but eventually it would fall from that narrow line.

THE JEWISH PRESENCE IN YEMEN

According to legend, Jews were present in Yemen from the remotest antiquity. A Jewish myth holds that the foundation of the Jewish community in Yemen began when a group of Jews left Jerusalem forty-two years before the destruction of the First Temple in 587/586 BCE. When Ezra called them to return to the Holy Land upon the rebuilding of the Second Temple, they refused, and Ezra brought a curse down on them, sentencing them to intellectual and physical privation. Another legend claimed that Jews came to Yemen with the Queen of Sheba, following her on her return from Israel after her conversion to Judaism. Regardless of their origins, Jews in southern Arabia were numerous, and their cultural importance grew with time.²⁶ Arabia, with its vast pagan population, was under increasing pressure from missionaries by the beginning of the fifth century CE. The Persian Gulf was under the influence of Zoroastrian and Nestorian Christian missionaries, while the Red Sea regions were influenced by Monophysite Christians from Ethiopia. But it was not just Christians and Zoroastrians who were peddling their religions. According to an Arab source, Judaism was brought to Yemen and southern Arabia by the Tubba king of Yemen—Abu Karib—who while on campaign against the Jewish city of Medina, was prevented from destroying it by the intervention of two rabbis who impressed him with their sagacity. He converted to Judaism and took the rabbis to Himyar. His own people barred his reentry until the rabbis proved by walking through fire the superiority of the Hebrew God over their Arabian deities. The rabbis emerged from

the fire unharmed, while the pagan priests died. According to this legend, the people of Himyar then converted to Judaism *en masse*.²⁷

This is, of course, a legendary account of the Jewish presence in Yemen, but there may have been some fact behind the legend. The Christian missionary Theophilus, who came to Yemen in the mid-fourth century, complained that he found a great number of Jews.²⁸ By the middle of the fourth century, the rulers of Yemen were employing monotheistic formulae that were Jewish or Judaic in character. One inscription from 378 CE proclaimed the completion of buildings by a Himyar monarch had been accomplished "through the power of their lord, the lord of heaven."²⁹ Such formulae, along with "the lord of sky and heaven," "the owner of the sky and earth," and the expression "the Merciful,"³⁰ point to some move to monotheism by the royal house of Yemen.³¹ So with the adoption of the Jewish belief in one god, there began an incremental conversion to Judaism similar to that which we saw in the myths surrounding the conversion of the Khazars to Judaism.³² In the time period between full paganism and the Jewish conversion of the Himyarites, a halfway point was reached. And much like it did for the Khazars, the adoption of this proto-Judaism may have had a political element. The profession of monotheism, and later full-fledged Judaism, distanced the Himyarites from the Christianity of the Byzantines and their Ethiopian allies and the Zoroastrianism of the Persians. In an age when a ruler's religion could bring him under the suzerainty of other powers, conversion to a neutral religion had obvious advantages. There is significant archeological evidence of the abandonment of pagan temples toward the conclusion of the fourth century and of the almost complete disappearance of expressions of devotion to the old tribal gods shortly thereafter.³³

For later Muslim Arabs, the conversion of the Himyar kings became an important element in the rise of Islam. The Jewish kings of Himyar were often depicted in Islamic sources as Muslims even before the advent of Islam. As monarchs fighting under the banner of a monotheistic religion, they became important legendary precursors of the Prophet.³⁴

A CRUSAIDER WAR: THE BATTLE BETWEEN HIMYAR AND ETHIOPIA

As Himyar increasingly came under the sway of Judaism, it moved toward a collision course with Byzantium and Ethiopia, as these Christian kingdoms viewed the adoption of Judaism by Yemen's royal house as not merely a religious affront, but a check against their expanded power in the region.

As we saw above in the legendary account of Abu-Karib's conversion to Judaism by the Jews of Medina, it appears that the Himyar kings had set a course that bound them toward Judaism. Abu-Karib married a Jewish woman and with her bore three sons. The youngest was named Yusuf, nicknamed Dhu Nuwas, or "Lord Side-Locks," apparently because he wore his hair according to the Biblical dictum that states the corners of the head should not be shaved.³⁵ On assuming the throne, he consolidated the hold of Judaism in Himyarite Yemen. In a host of legends about him in pre-Islamic Arabic literature, and also Greek and Ethiopian accounts, he is depicted as a Jewish zealot who persecuted the Christian inhabitants of Yemen. But the actual picture is unclear. It is likely that Dhu Nuwas was the leader of a liberation movement fighting to free Yemen from increasing Ethiopian meddling in the nation's affairs. Judaism became a vital element in this resistance to Ethiopian domination. Dhu Nuwas realized that a confrontation with Ethiopia and perhaps Byzantium was brewing and sought the assistance of Ethiopia's enemy, the Persians. When that support failed to materialize, Dhu Nuwas was forced to fight Ethiopia without any aid.

The Christian community of Yemen was comprised primarily of Ethiopians. Dhu Nuwas viewed them as a potential rebellious element or fifth column in his country. So when a revolt in the predominantly Christian city of Najran broke out in 523 CE, Dhu Nuwas thought it to be a prelude to an Ethiopian invasion, and according to some accounts, he slaughtered all the Christians in the city as he quashed the rebellion.³⁶

The response from Ethiopia was not long in coming. The simmering tensions between the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia and the Jewish Kingdom of Himyarite Yemen had finally overflowed with the massacre at Najran (which was depicted by the Eastern Orthodox tradition as the martyrdom of innocent believers, and the date of the executions is venerated to this day). To avenge Najran, the Ethiopians, with Byzantine ships, landed a large army in Yemen and succeeded in killing Dhu Nuwas and conquering his kingdom. The Ethiopians set up a Christian Himyarite king as a local client ruler, who was required to pay a large tribute to Ethiopia. A contingent of the Ethiopian army—comprised of slaves who refused to return to Ethiopia upon victory—settled in Yemen, where they seized land and property with impunity.³⁷

With such unresolved tensions, the stage was set for yet another armed conflict. The Christian Himyarite kings in power were little more than puppets, and Christianity was associated with the onerous taxes collected as tribute to Ethiopia. The sizable population of former Ethiopian slave troops who stole land and abused the local population further fueled dis-

content. According to Arab traditions, a revolt was led by Sayf Dhu Yazan, who was a descendant of Dhu Nuwas. For many in Himyar, Judaism became associated with political freedom, and as such was a convenient banner to rally military action. Dhu Yazan was more successful than his ancestor as he appealed for and secured the aid of the Persians to overthrow the Ethiopians and their client kings. But the move did little for Yemen's independence. The involvement of the Persians led to their increased influence in the country, which effectively ended Jewish political independence in southern Arabia. Yemen became a vassal of Persia, and this remained the case until the rise of Islam, when it was absorbed in the late seventh century into the expanding Arab caliphate. In the centuries after Islam, even as Jewish groups in Arabia were forced to leave or were assimilated, the Jews of Yemen continued to have a strong connection to Judaism that would last until and beyond their resettlement to the State of Israel in 1949.³⁸

Just as we saw with the Jewish tribes of northern Arabia after the rise of Islam, legends of independent Jewish tribes continued to exist in Yemen right up until modern times, especially in the mountainous regions where political control was always difficult to maintain. The historical memory of independent Jewish Himyar died only slowly. There are some indications that Dhu Nuwas hoped to conquer all of Arabia, to unite the southern Yemeni Jews with the powerful Jewish tribes of the Hijaz and lead a crusade against the Byzantine Greeks who ruled the Holy Land. This pan-Jewish state, containing both Arabia and Palestine, would have far exceeded the boundaries of the Biblical United Monarchy of Israel even at its most expansive.³⁹ If Dhu Nuwas and his successors had been able to establish a stable Jewish state in Arabia and Palestine, the history of the Middle East would have been altered. But of course, his ambitions ended in failure, and with the rise of Islam, any Jewish state within the Islamic sphere was doomed.⁴⁰

ANOTHER ZION: *JUDACIUM FELIX*

The two experiences of Jewish political freedom in Arabia—in Yemen and among the Jewish tribes of the Hijaz—offer compelling examples of Jewish polities away from the Land of Israel. In many ways, the Jewish tribes of the Hijaz were much like Jewish communities in other lands that maintained their own internal affairs, but with the addition of the all-important element of political and military freedom. In politically fractured, pre-Islamic, tribal Arabia, they controlled their own destinies. The

Jews of the Hijaz were able to mount appreciable resistance to Mohammad and his growing religious movement and were forever enshrined in the Muslim tradition for their recalcitrance. But the example of Yemen offered a clearer example of another Zion. For at least a century, the Himyarite Kingdom became progressively more Jewish, and finally a line of Jewish kings was established. The conversion brought the land the unwanted attention of the Christian powers to the north and west. Dhu Nuwas was such a powerful messianic figure that his story was retold in a favorable light in Islamic tradition, where he was considered a precursor of the Prophet. And Dhu Nuwas may very well have harbored such messianic expectations, hoping to capture all of Arabia and then the Byzantine holdings in the Holy Land, and rule a Zion far greater in dimensions than anything that had come before.

SIX

IN THE MANNER OF THE JEWISH TRADITION: THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF ADIABENE

THE PRELUDE TO A REVOLT

Sometime in the fifth decade of the Common Era, the royal house in the Kingdom of Adiabene, which was located in portions of today's Iraq, converted to Judaism. The conversion, like that of the Khazars, may have been partially motivated by political circumstances. The Khazars appear to have been satisfied with governing traditional Khazar lands and did not yearn to unite their Caspian holdings with Jerusalem as their capital. But as we will see, the royal house of Adiabene had designs on the Holy Land. The royal house of Adiabene, led by Queen Helena and her two sons Izates and Monobazus, created a Jewish dynasty in the Middle East, in a province of Rome's traditional eastern enemy: the sprawling Kingdom of Parthia. The Jewish state of Adiabene ended around 115 CE. Then all trace of Jewish royal power died in Adiabene, but not before the House of Monobazus had made an appreciable impact on Judaism. We know of these influences from both the writings of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, and from some of the literature associated with Rabbinical Judaism—particularly the Talmud and some of the midrashim, in particular an interpretative work on the book of Genesis.

THE GREAT REVOLT

In 68 CE, relations between the Roman province of Judea and the Roman Empire were near an all-time low. The pressures of more than one hundred years of tension between the Jews of Palestine and their Roman overlords were about to spill over into an active crisis, and in the aftermath, little about life in Roman Palestine would ever be the same. The great variety of practices and customs within the Judaism of the first

century, which found its expression in a multitude of Jewish groups both in Palestine and the wider Mediterranean, abruptly ended. From the ashes of the revolt, Rabbinical Judaism eventually formed, and a small sect within Judaism—the followers of Jesus—expanded the range of their movement, until the emperor of Rome converted to Christianity in 312 CE and significantly widened the new religion's horizon. Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Roman army, Judaism was transformed. Under the direction of the “rabbis,” or teachers, Judaism became a religion no longer centered on the ritual slaughter of animals and the paying of tithes to priests, but on the study of the Torah and its accompanying set of interpretations, known as the Oral Law.

For the Romans, the Jewish Revolt was a relatively minor event—an uprising of a minority group living in a remote area of the Empire. Certainly it was urgently quashed, but the Jews of Palestine presented a smaller problem to the Romans than other pressing matters, like the increasing threat of Germanic tribes making incursions along Rome's northern boundaries or the other great superpowers of the day, like Parthia, which lay to the east of Rome. The sprawling, ill-defined boundary between Rome and Parthia was a flashpoint, and the relations between the two states, by turns cordial and warlike, seemed to take a turn with each generation. These three factors—the turbulent state of Roman Judea, the threat of Parthia to the east, and the fragile condition of the Roman peace with its powerful eastern neighbor—bring us to our next example of a sovereign Jewish state: Adiabene. Located in parts of modern-day Iraq, Kurdistan, and Armenia, Adiabene was once a province of the old Assyrian Empire. By the first century it was a vassal state in the Parthian Empire. The Parthians controlled a loose association of territories by stationing garrisons about the empire and by fostering strategic alliances with smaller neighboring states. Adiabene, with the conversion of its royal house to Judaism, was a player in the rough-and-tumble dynamics of Parthian politics, both before and after the years of the Jewish Revolt. But in order to explore Adiabene in detail, we first need to understand some unique characteristics of the Parthian Empire, to see how these elements helped create a Jewish state in Adiabene.¹

PARTHIA: THE EASTERN SUPERPOWER

Parthia was the heir to Alexander the Great's Eastern empire, ruled by the Seleucid Dynasty, beginning in the third century BCE. The origins of the Parthians are obscure. They seem to have begun as nomads and built a small, independent empire in modern-day Iran. But it was with the rule of

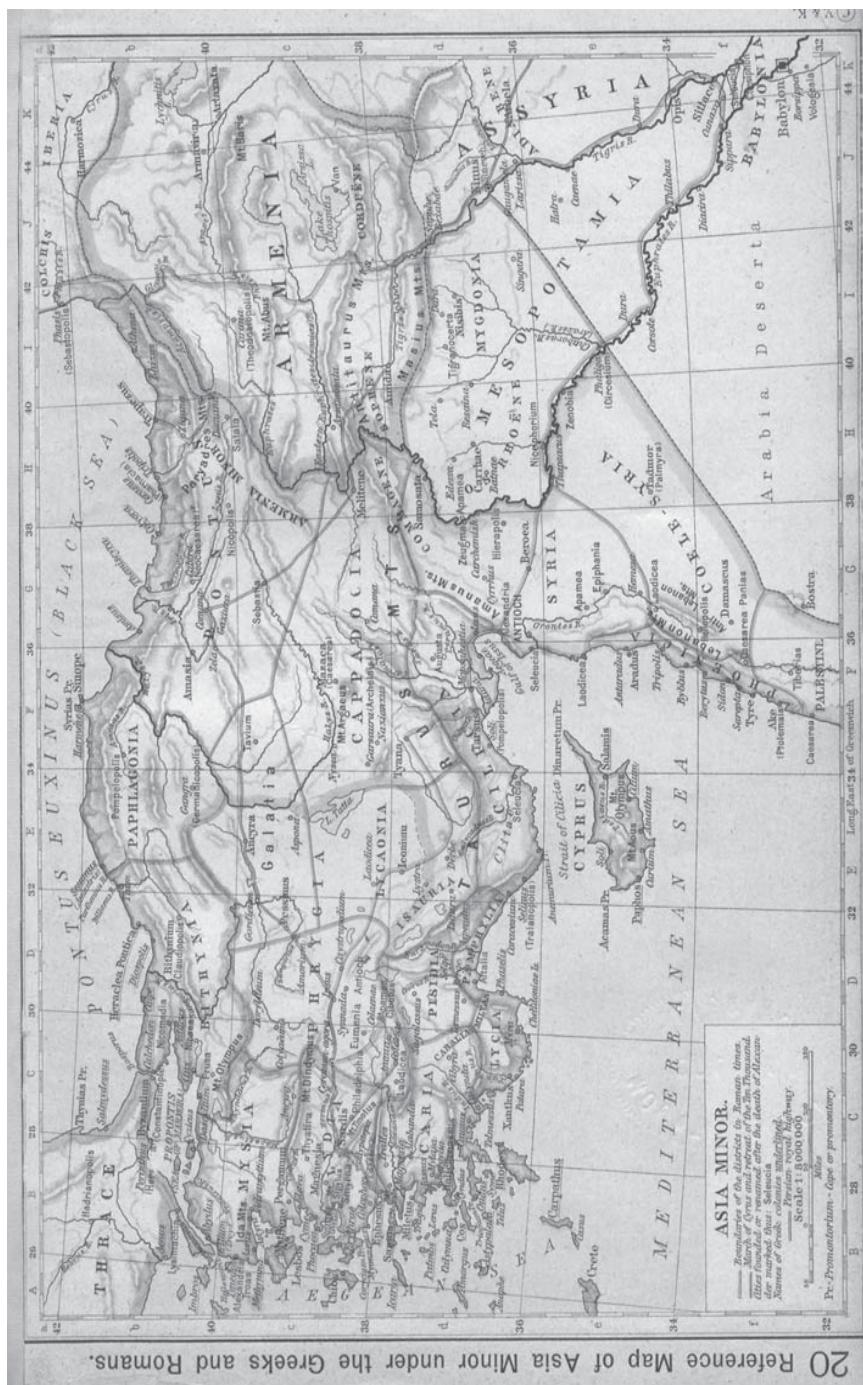


figure 6.1. Map of Adiabene
Map showing the location of Adiabene (far right) and surrounding nations during the time of the Roman Empire, first century CE.

their first great king, Mithridates the Great (171–138 BCE) that they began their period of conquest. Eventually they controlled all of modern Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, eastern Syria, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The Parthian Empire was geographically vast, ethnically diverse, and unwieldy to govern. The Parthians, as the heirs to Alexander's Greek empire to the east, retained a strong Hellenic element in their rule. Their empire survived, essentially intact, for four centuries, only dissolving in 227 CE when their last king was defeated by the Persians of the Sassanid Dynasty.²

In spite of these impediments, the empire was prosperous. It occupied an advantageous trade position between the West and East, and early on it established trade contact with the Chinese. When Parthia began to invade India, its trade routes became one of the chief conduits by which Buddhism spread to East Asia.³ Parthia collected its main revenues through lucrative trade duties from Asia and the tributes collected from vassal states. Parthia was a hierarchical, feudal state. Its territories were controlled by aristocrats who swore allegiance to the king and showed their fidelity and subjugation by providing both money for the state through tribute and troops for the army. As in most feudal societies, this unequal distribution of power eventually led to squabbles. Nobles often decided to revolt against the king, or withhold their tribute, and the king of Parthia was often forced to militarily confront recalcitrant nobles and risk a civil war. This political volatility, an intractable element of Parthian society, was to play a key role in the creation of a Jewish dynasty in Adiabene.

The compartmentalization of power in Parthia also led to further complications with Rome. Rather than having a stable border of fixed rivers or mountains, Parthia and Rome had no natural delineation between their empires. A series of vassal states between them acted as buffers, and these states' allegiances blew with the prevailing wind, whether from Rome or Parthia. This too was to become a decisive factor in the emergence of Jewish Adiabene and the role it was to play (or almost play) in the Jewish Revolt in 66–73 CE. In the mutable world of politics in the zone between Rome and Parthia, wily nobles and petty kings were always looking for opportunities to consolidate their power and perhaps, through some luck and strategic alliances, gain an empire of their own.

PARTHIA AS JOSEPHUS SEES IT: THE JEWISH STATES TO THE EAST

One of the main historical sources about the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene to Judaism is the writings of Josephus.⁴ The great Jewish his-

torian was a participant and witness to the Jewish Revolt from 66 to 73 CE. He briefly commanded troops on the Jewish side in the Galilee but later defected to the Romans. After the war, he left Judea forever and settled in Rome. There he wrote in Greek, largely for a gentile audience, his *Jewish War*, which chronicled the defeat of the Jewish nationalists at the hands of the Romans. Some twenty years later, he wrote another work called *The Antiquities* which also supplied information about the revolt that had destroyed Jerusalem. Taken together, Josephus's accounts provide the most detailed view of the conversion to Judaism of the royal house of Adiabene.

Josephus started his writing by laying groundwork for the conversion. He writes in *The Antiquities* that two Jewish brothers, Anilaeus and Asinaeus, from the region of Neharda in Parthia, stage a *coup* and wrest control of the area from the local Parthian nobility. The king of Parthia, Artabanus, then has two options: send troops to the area to depose the two Jewish brothers or acknowledge them as the legitimate rulers of the area. King Artabanus is weakened at the time by successful revolts by other local nobles and has no resources to send into the large region of Neharda, so he allows the Jewish brothers to rule. So, for some fifteen years, until both brothers die, two Jewish kings rule Neharda.⁵ It is a time of rampant civil strife—for example, from about 1 to 40 CE, no coins are issued from the central state of Parthia. Either the kings of Parthia did not have adequate control of those cities with mints, or they were too weak to make money.⁶

The Jewish Kingdom of Anilaeus and Asinaeus set the stage for Adiabene. To the east of Rome, in a land which had been home to a large population of Jews since the Babylonian exile in 597 BCE,⁷ a Jewish sovereign state existed that lasted a scant fifteen years. But Josephus appears to have used it as an example of what may come next. The Jewish Revolt was not successful in Judea. There, an independent Jewish polity was impossible because of Rome's might. But to the east, in the loosely constructed Parthian Empire, Josephus implies that a Jewish state had a better chance of success.⁸

THE RISE OF A JEWISH KING: THE HOUSE OF MONOBAZUS IN *THE ANTIQUITIES*

Josephus's account of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene appears rather abruptly between other materials presented in *The Antiquities*. He likely used some other, unnamed source (perhaps a royal chronicle of Adiabene) for his material.⁹ Josephus connects the story of the conversion to the previous material with the rejoinder “[a]t the same time,”¹⁰ indicating that during the unfolding of events pertaining to the buildup

of tensions prior to the Jewish Revolt that he is relating in *The Antiquities*, the royal house of Adiabene was converting to Judaism and playing a crucial role in the politics of Parthia. There King Monobazus takes his sister Helena as his wife, and she quickly becomes pregnant. One night, when he is sleeping with her, he places his hand on her pregnant belly after she has gone to sleep, and he thinks he hears a voice telling him to remove his hand from her womb, so as not to cramp the baby within it, who by “the providence of God had had a happy start and will attain a fortunate end.”¹¹ Monobazus is disturbed by the voice and awakens his wife to tell her. They call the child Izates.¹²

Izates has many half-brothers, and they grow envious of the good favor his father showers on him. So Monobazus sends Izates off to Abennerigus, the king of Charax Spasini,¹³ who is entrusted with the safety of the boy. King Abennerigus shows goodwill to Izates and gives him his daughter in marriage, along with a territory that produces a large income.¹⁴

As King Monobazus ages, he longs to see Izates and summons him so he can lay eyes on him before he dies. He gives Izates the land of Carron, which has abundant natural resources, and is said to contain, Josephus writes, the remains of Noah’s ark, which “to this day are shown to those who are curious to see them.”¹⁵ This connection of Izates to a piece of lore from the Bible, although seemingly incidental, becomes important. He inhabits a land that has a mark of Biblical authority, just as he retains a mark of godly election. Izates stays in this land until his father’s death.¹⁶ On that day, Queen Helena summons all the military commanders and governors in the land and tells them that King Monobazus has ordered Izates to take his throne upon his death. The nobles, on hearing this, concur that Izates should be king. However, they wish to put Izates’s brothers and half brothers to death to avoid a possible civil war upon succession. Helena is pleased at the endorsement of the late King Monobazus’s decision but wishes first for Izates to return so they can consult with him about his wishes.¹⁷ The nobles still fear the brothers’ reaction and request that Helena put them in custody until Izates returns and place a trustee on the throne whom Helena can trust until Izates can take the helm of state.¹⁸ Helena puts her eldest son Monobazus on the throne, places a diadem, or crown, upon his head, and gives him his father’s signet ring. She instructs him to rule until his brother returns. When Izates arrives, Monobazus graciously steps down.¹⁹

In the first part of the tale, Izates’s special birth story is related. A voice, probably God’s, instructs his father that the boy in Helena’s womb has a special dispensation. This mark of election is apparent to others. Izates is very much like Joseph, the young son of the Patriarch Jacob, who is gifted

and fair. When people see Izates, they seek to help and shower favors upon him. Like Joseph, Izates has a brood of brothers and half brothers who are jealous of his special status.²⁰

Next, Josephus relates the second part of Izates's election. When Izates is living in Charax Spasini, a Jewish merchant named Ananias visits the king's wives and teaches them to worship God in "the manner of the Jewish tradition."²¹ It is through their agency, Josephus writes, that Ananias is brought to Izates's attention, and when Izates is summoned by his father to return, just before his death, Ananias joins him.²² At the same time, Queen Helena is also instructed by another Jew, and she is "brought over to their laws."²³ When Izates comes to Adiabene he is distressed to find his brothers in chains, and unwilling to kill them, he sends some of them with their children to Claudius Caesar in Rome as hostages and the others to Artabanus, the Parthian king.²⁴

When Izates learns that his mother has embraced Judaism, he is pleased and is "zealous to convert to it himself."²⁵ But, Josephus writes, he cannot be considered an authentic Jew until he is circumcised. When his mother realizes his zeal to be circumcised, she persuades him to delay the procedure. She fears that this visible symbol of Jewishness, which is not the religion of his ancestors, will alienate him from his subjects and perhaps lead to a revolt by the nobility. Ananias the Jew concurs, fearing that he will also be punished if the king converts formally to Judaism, so for a while, Izates does nothing.²⁶

Later, a Galilean Jew named Eleazar, who is known for his extreme piety (and who is traveling through Adiabene for reasons not stated) convinces the king that he must be circumcised.²⁷ He comes to the king and finds him reading the Law of Moses, and says, "In your ignorance you are guilty of the greatest offense against the Law. For you ought not merely to read the law but also, and even more, to do what is commanded within it."²⁸ On hearing this, the king postpones no longer and immediately calls his physician to perform the operation. Then Izates sends for Helena and Ananias and informs them of what he has done. They both fear, once more, that the formal conversion of the king to a foreign religion will put them at risk, but Josephus writes that it is "God who was to prevent their fears from being realized. For although Izates and his children were often threatened with destruction, God preserved them . . ."²⁹

After this, Queen Helena desires to visit Jerusalem, and her son provides her with money and provisions and even escorts her part of the way. Her arrival is advantageous for the people of Jerusalem, for at that time a famine is ravaging Judea. Helena promptly sends her attendants to Alexandria to buy grain and to Cyprus for a cargo of dried figs. When

the provisions arrive, she distributes them among the needy. When Izates learns of the famine, he sends money to the leaders of Jerusalem to help those most in need.³⁰

Josephus's narrative then returns to Adiabene and Parthia and picks up the political line of the story of Izates. Artabanus, the king of the Parthians, discovers that some governors of Parthia have devised a plot against him. (As previously stated, in the feudal structure of Parthia, plots of this sort were not uncommon.) King Artabanus escapes and travels to Izates to enlist his aid. The two kings meet, and after a formal exchange of pleasantries, Izates promises to help restore him to rule. Izates writes to the Parthian governors and asks them to restore King Artabanus to the throne. They write back and explain that they are not unwilling to receive King Artabanus but that they have already installed another man named Cinnamus, and they do not wish to instigate a civil war by removing him. Cinnamus, however, is somehow persuaded to give up the throne, and upon meeting with Artabanus, removes the diadem, or crown, from his head.³¹ Thus, Izates finds a diplomatic solution to the crisis. King Artabanus, in return, rewards Izates and allows him to wear his tiara upright, which is the prerogative of the king of Parthia alone, and to sleep on a bed of gold, which is another high royal honor.³² He also gives him extensive territory, which he carves away from the Kingdom of Armenia, including an area called Nisibis, which is home to a sizeable Jewish population. So the Jewish king of Adiabene now has many Jewish subjects.³³

Not long after this, Josephus writes, King Artabanus dies, and his son Vardanes takes the throne of Parthia. King Vardanes decides to go to war with Rome and seeks help from Izates. Izates declines, citing the power of Rome's legions, and the fact that he has sent five sons to study in the imperial capital, as well as the presence of his mother in Jerusalem, which is Roman administered. King Vardanes, Josephus explains, is enraged by this response and decides to wage war on Izates. But he is unable to act on this impulse because his subjects hear he plans to go to war against Rome; they put him to death and give the government to his brother.³⁴ The problems with Parthian succession continue, as not long afterward, he too is slain by a conspiracy and is succeeded by his brother Vologeses, who gives parts of his kingdom to two other brothers, apparently in a deal to stave off more politically inspired murders.³⁵

Josephus then reports that Izates's brother Monobazus and his kinsman see that God has showered favor on Izates and convert to Judaism. Unlike Izates, whose action did not inspire the disfavor of the jealous nobility, Monobazus's conversion causes animosity. At first, the noblemen do nothing but store it "in their hearts and eagerly sought a convenient op-

portunity to make them pay for their act.”³⁶ But then the nobles convince the Arab king Abias to make war on Izates for a large sum of money and promise not to lend support to Izates when he engages him in war. King Abias consents, and when he invades Adiabene, Izates feigns panic and flees. But he quickly returns, and finding the camp of rebellious nobles, kills them for their treachery. The next day, Izates confronts the Arab king in battle and wins, but he fails to take Abias alive, as he commits suicide in a stronghold.³⁷

In the next attempt to dethrone Izates, the nobles of Adiabene approach Vologeses, the king of Parthia, and persuade him to try to remove Izates from the throne of Adiabene and replace him with a Parthian who respects the ancestral ways of his people. King Vologeses agrees but has no honest pretext to start a war. So he demands that Izates return the honors his father, King Artabanus, had bestowed on him: the golden bed and the right to wear the tiara upright. Izates realizes the implications of this request: if he returns the honors, he will appear weak, and it will encourage Vologeses to eventually wage war against him. So Izates replies “God is mightier than mankind”³⁸ and places his children and wives in a fortress, stores grain in the towers, and burns the surrounding pasturage so it cannot support a large army. After these preparations, Izates waits. The Parthians arrive with a large force of cavalry and infantry sooner than expected and set up a camp between Adiabene and Media. Izates, who has some six thousand horsemen, pitches his camp nearby. A messenger arrives in Izates’s camp from the King of Parthia and enumerates how mighty the Parthian Empire is and how many lands and peoples it encompasses, to try to persuade Izates to surrender. After hearing this, Izates replies that he is aware that the Parthian king is strong, but he also knows that God is greater than any king. Then Izates throws himself on the ground and covers himself with ashes and offers a prayer to God for his deliverance.³⁹ Josephus explains that God listened to Izates’s prayer, for on that very night a letter arrived at King Vologeses’s camp to inform him that the Dahae and Sacae, nomadic tribesman, have taken advantage of King Vologeses’s absence and invaded Parthian territory, with much looting and ravaging of the land. King Vologeses has no choice but to retreat “in frustration.”⁴⁰ And Josephus writes, “Thus by the providence of God Izates escaped from the threats of the Parthians.”⁴¹

Not long after this, Josephus concludes, Izates dies, having completed fifty-five years of life and having been a monarch for twenty-four years. Although he left twenty-four sons, he gives instructions that his brother Monobazus be crowned king to reward him for holding the throne and then relinquishing it so many years ago upon the death of their father.⁴²

Queen Helena hears of her son's death and returns to Adiabene from Jerusalem and soon afterward dies, "weighed down with age and pain from her sorrow."⁴³ King Monobazus II sends her bones and those of his brother to Jerusalem, where they are buried in pyramids outside the city.⁴⁴ Josephus concludes the story of the royal house of Monobazus with the words "As for the acts of King Monobazus during his lifetime, I shall narrate them later."⁴⁵ However, nowhere in Josephus's extant writings is this narrative found.

IZATES, MONOBAZUS, AND HELENA IN RABBINICAL SOURCES

Thus ends Josephus's tale of the royal house of Adiabene. According to Josephus, Izates converted due to a genuine desire to embrace Judaism after he was exposed to the religion by his wives, who were suitably impressed by the religion after a Jewish merchant introduced them to it. Queen Helena was also favorably impressed by the religion through another Jew. Izates then fully converted when he met a zealous Galilean Jew, and further down the line, his brother Monobazus and unnamed kinsmen converted. Of course, the whole spate of conversions was endorsed by God's apparent message to King Monobazus the Elder that his son was specially blessed.

Before we critically examine Josephus's account of Izates, Monobazus, and Helena, we must take a look at the scattered references to these monarchs in Rabbinical sources. It appears the historicity of these figures is not open to doubt as they made an impact on first-century Jewish sources, both in Josephus and various accounts in Jewish interpretative works that were compiled at a later time, but whose sources stretch back to at least the first century.⁴⁶ And indeed, the ruins of the mausoleums mentioned by Josephus in the *Jewish Antiquities* still exist. Within them are three niches: one for Queen Helena, and the other two for Monobazus and Izates.⁴⁷

As with many other figures mentioned in the diverse writings known as "Rabbinical," the contexts vary widely. Most Rabbinical literature is concerned with elucidating points of Jewish law and not biography or history. So Izates, Monobazus, and Helena are mentioned in unique, highly circumscribed contexts, and usually only to clarify some element of Jewish ritual law or practice.

In the Talmud tractate *Sukkah*, which pertains to the proper construction of the booth for the holiday of Sukkoth, Queen Helena is mentioned in a discussion about the height of a sukkah. One rabbi explains that a sukkah higher than twenty cubits is invalid and not fit for use. Rabbi Ju-

dah disputes this with this example: "The sukkah of Helene in Lud was twenty cubits tall, and sages went in and out, when visiting her, and not one of them said a thing." He is answered, in turn, "It was because she was a woman, and a woman is not liable to keep the commandment of sitting in a sukkah." Rabbi Judah then responds: "Now did she have seven sons who are disciples of sages, and all of them were dwelling in the same sukkah! And furthermore, everything she did was done in accord with the instruction of the sages."⁴⁸

In yet another tractate of the Talmud, *Nazir*, (which pertains to the Nazirite oath, which was taken by both men and women to forsake wine, grapes, and the cutting of hair for a proscribed period) it is written "Helene the Queen—her son went off to war, and she said 'If my son comes home from war whole and in one piece, I shall be a Nazirite for seven years.'"⁴⁹ The tractate continues that he did indeed return from the war unharmed, so Helena becomes a Nazirite for seven years. Later she goes to the Land of Israel, and there a follower Hillel, the great sage, informs her that she needs to be a Nazirite for another seven years, for a person can only take the Nazirite vow in the Land of Israel.⁵⁰ So she remains a Nazir for another seven years. At this point the debate continues on between the disciples of Shammai and the disciples of Hillel, who argue about the terms of being a Nazir.

So Queen Helena appeared in the Talmud during the course of discussions about the dimensions of a sukkah and details of what is enjoined upon someone who has taken a vow as a Nazir. In Josephus's account of Helena, little was stated about her religious practices. She was vaguely said to have practiced Judaism, but her prime roles were as the mother of Izates and Monobazus, two Jewish kings of Adiabene, and through the work she did to alleviate the famine in Palestine during her visit to Jerusalem. However, in the Talmudic sources, her Judaism was considered exemplary enough to use during debates about ritual matters. Apparently, stories about Helena were on the minds of some of the rabbis of the Talmud since they employed her in the course of their discussions.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, Queen Helena is mentioned again as providing ritual items for use in the Temple. Tractate *Yoma* explains that she made a gold candelabrum to go above the Temple gate, and along with King Monobazus, provided golden handles for the utensils used during the Day of Atonement in the Temple service.⁵¹ In another tractate, King Monobazus is mentioned (and here, we may presume Monobazus II is meant). According to this passage, Monobazus squanders his fortunes during years of drought. His brothers protest to him that he has depleted the state treasuries. The language used in this passage plays on

the version of Monobazus's name in Aramaic: *Munbaz*. Here, *Munbaz* squanders his treasury, called a *bizbez* in Aramaic, which is a pun on his name. Monobazus responds with his own word play, saying, "my fathers stored up treasure below [on the earth] while I have stored up above [in Heaven]."⁵² Interestingly, the Talmudic passages ascribe the end of the drought not to Queen Helena and Izates, as in Josephus, but to Izates's successor, Monobazus. The sages of the Talmud apparently did not know the identity of Izates, or else they used the term Monobazus as a sort of generic title for Adiabene nobility. Regardless, the exceptional piety and generosity of the Adiabene royals are stressed in all these passages. In yet another tractate, the nameless "House of Monobazus" places a *mezuzah* on a pole and hangs it behind the doors of an inn. This act is seen as dangerous to the sages of the Talmud, who believe that displaying so large a *mezuzah* will expose Jews to gentile aggression.⁵³

Finally, a long passage in *Bereshith Rabba*, an interpretative work about the book of Genesis, explores the conversion of the Adiabene royals.⁵⁴ The passage portrays Monobazus and Zoitos (which is perhaps a corruption or alternate name for Izates) sitting and reading the Torah. Together they come to the passage in Genesis 17:11 which commands circumcision of the foreskin, and they both turn their heads to opposite walls and cry. Then, without mutual knowledge, they are circumcised. A few days later, when they are again studying and come upon the passage, they say to each other: "Woe to you my brother, and not me."⁵⁵ And then they reveal to each other that they have both been circumcised. Their unnamed mother, upon hearing of the circumcisions, goes to the king and explains that both her sons had sores on their foreskins that had to be removed. The king approves of the procedures. The writers of this midrash apparently endorse the subterfuge, for they then ask, "How did the Holy One, Blessed be He, repay him? . . . When he went forth to war, an ambush was set for him, but an angel descended and saved him."⁵⁶

There are differences and similarities between Josephus's writing and the Rabbinical accounts of the Adiabene Jewish royals. Broadly, both stress their firm and unwavering commitment to Judaism. True, Izates first hesitated to fully convert in Josephus's account, but he was soon circumcised, and when the political hold of Izates was not threatened, Helena openly practiced Judaism and traveled to Jerusalem. There is an element of *Realpolitik* here, a practical vacillation on a religious question that could influence royal power. However, Josephus's account gives the general sense that the fidelity of Izates, Helena, and Monobazus to Judaism protected and fostered their lives and reign.

The Rabbinical sources stress the piety of this family as well, but in a different sense. These various sources are not concerned about the political situation in Adiabene but rather their exemplary performance of the practical commandments or dictates of Jewish law. In one case, displaying a *mezuzah* on an inn door is used as an example of a dangerous *overabundance* of piety! But the sages were not personally interested in the royal family or their unique situation in their country. Rather, they were quite rightly employed as examples in discussion of Jewish law, in various tractates of the Talmud, and in the interpretative work of Genesis in *Bereshith Rabba*. With the possible exception of the circumcision scene, all the examples that feature Helena or Monobazus take place in the Holy Land. If we use Josephus's account as a control on the Rabbinical stories, we can conclude that key characteristics of Helena, Monobazus, and Izates were forgotten or distorted by the time of the compilation of the Rabbinical materials. The author of the *Bereshith Rabba* story does not appear to know Helena's name and portrays Izates and Monobazus converting concurrently. In Josephus, Izates converts first, followed by Monobazus, and they do so after the death of their father. In the rabbinical sources, both men convert, or at least are circumcised during the lifetime of their father. How do we account for these discrepancies? The corrosive force of time may be one way. In any case, it is certain that these gentile royals converted to Judaism, and a Jewish king to the east of the Holy Land governed, in at least one case, a province with a significant Jewish population and was remembered by both the rabbis and Josephus. Josephus most likely worked from a source book, perhaps even a royal chronicle of the Jewish kings and queens of Adiabene, while the rabbis perhaps relied on memory or oral tradition. It is true that the rabbis then filtered their information through their own interpretative needs, but Josephus did just the same—only for reasons that were written between the lines of his account.

A GREATER JEWISH STATE

As in the case with other conversions of kings and royalty, it is only fitting to ask if there was a political motivation for the conversion by the Adiabene royals. Of course, just like the conversion of less lofty individuals, the conversions may have been genuine. Izates and Helena may have converted to Judaism because of firm conviction. But as monarchs, their motivations could have been more complex. The conversions may have had political benefits. Josephus's story showed that converting had

a downside: it alienated the royal house of Adiabene from the powerful nobility of the country, which did not, it appears, convert to Judaism. It also risked alienating the population at large, separating the royal family from the traditions and customs of their people.

So what was the benefit of the conversion? From the perspective of the West, the Jews in the first century were a sizable minority in the Roman Empire, who regardless of their number or their frequent revolts against Rome (both in Judea and the Diaspora), could pose no real threat to the Roman state. But from the perspective of Adiabene, the situation was different. As we saw earlier, usurper Jews like Anilaeus and Asinaeus were able to negotiate with the Parthian king and gain sovereignty over sizeable chunks of territory after illegally seizing them.⁵⁷ In nearby Armenia, Jewish dynasts, descended from the Herodians, also briefly held power.⁵⁸ Perhaps Izates and Helena saw an alliance between the Jews of Parthia and Palestine, along with other strategic alliances of states to the east of Rome, as a possibility to seize more power. They may have envisioned a war against Rome with grand goals: the seizure of Roman lands in Syria and Judea, and perhaps parts of Egypt with its considerable Jewish population. Maybe they even had ambitions to be monarchs of a Jewish Kingdom that stretched from Parthia to Judea, with their capital in Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Interestingly, the Adiabene royals living in Jersualem were the only significant Diaspora Jewish group who offered aid to the rebels during the Jewish Revolt.⁶⁰ The Adiabene royals may have wanted to use Judaism as the thread to tie together the vast tracts of land that constitute the Roman Middle East and the Parthian Empire, with its own large Jewish population in Babylon. Under this assumption, the courting of favor that was embarked upon in the Holy Land by Izates, Helena, and Monobazus makes a great deal of political and practical sense. Like many local kings and lords in Parthia, they were always on the lookout for advantageous alliances, both to protect and expand their interests. If this indeed was their goal, it clearly failed. Jewish kings ruled Adiabene for about forty years, only to be supplanted by the arrival of Christianity in the late first century.⁶¹

There is evidence that a segment of the population of Adiabene that was not Jewish converted with the house of Monobazus.⁶² Perhaps, like the example of the Khazars, some element of the population followed the example set by their rulers and converted. In his *Jewish War*, Josephus mentions a Kenedeus and a Monobaz (probably not the monarch) who fought alongside the rebels in the Jewish Revolt.⁶³ In the Rabbinical literature there are some indications that the inhabitants of Adiabene converted. A certain Jacob of Hadyaba (Hadyaba is a Rabbinical term for

the area of Adiabene) is mentioned in the Talmud,⁶⁴ and the Talmud also describes a type of scorpion which was found only in Adiabene and was so deadly that a Jew is permitted to kill it even on the Sabbath.⁶⁵

As another Zion, Adiabene begins and ends as a fascinating footnote to the great Jewish Revolt against Rome, a conflict that was instrumental in the formation of Rabbinical Judaism. Like the previous examples in this work, the story of Izates, Helena, and Monobazus is couched in a legend which is based on historical events. Jewish Adiabene gives us a glimpse of an alternate view of Jewish history and shows that there was a degree of Jewish political autonomy in the very backyard of the Holy Land.

THE OTHER ADIABENE

Through the significantly refracting elements of Josephus and the Rabbinical accounts of the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene to Judaism, it is difficult to know how far Judaism penetrated the lives of the citizens in this Parthian vassal state. Certainly there were native Jews in Adiabene, and it can only be conjectured, though hardly doubted, that their status improved under a Jewish monarchy. There is also slight circumstantial evidence that some citizens of Adiabene may have converted to Judaism under the influence of their royalty. And perhaps, after the crushing of the Jewish Revolt by Rome in 73 CE, the Jewish Kingdom of Adiabene, which lasted until around 115 CE, acted as a beacon of hope for a people who had not only lost their political sovereignty, but also their traditional lands—and even their holy city of Jerusalem.⁶⁶

SEVEN

THEY HAVE NO SETTLED, AGREED BELIEFS: THE KAHINA AND THE BERBER JEWS

A JEWISH QUEEN?

In the seventh century, a Berber queen named the Kahina offered the only significant resistance to the Muslim invasion of North Africa. Her story was enmeshed in myth and legend through the following decades and centuries, when in their telling and retelling, her feats became greatly embellished and expanded. One Muslim chronicler claimed that the Kahina, and the tribe she hailed from, were Jewish. He wrote that many groups of Berbers were Jews before the arrival of Islam—a claim that was until quite recently accepted by many scholars as universally true. Like many legendary figures, her story and exploits explain more about the people recounting her tale than they do about her. As another Zion, the Kahina’s kingdom is difficult to study. But as we shall see, the idea of Jewish resistance to the advance of Islam had a strong component of community wish fulfillment. The collective memory of life in North Africa before the arrival of Islam was strongly influenced by both Islamic attitudes toward holy war and native Berber perceptions about their own subjugation.

A SHIFTING OF IDENTITY: THE KAHINA

Today, North Africa is part of the Arab world and is almost completely and homogenously Muslim and Arabic-speaking. But in the far west and southwest, there dwell groups of people known to the outside world as the Berbers. They speak their own tongue, which is called *Tamazight*, and they call themselves *Imazighen*, or Free Men, which is a completely apt characterization, for Berber history and group identity have often been marked by a struggle for independence. They usually resisted invaders,

and when they did not, they beneficially co-opted the foreign cultures and religions of the powers that ruled them by molding those strange cultures to their own. The effects of many of those traditions can be seen amongst Berbers today, who practice varieties of Islam that are widely eclectic in their range of religious expression, incorporating a great many practices that are probably transformations of older native Berber customs.¹ Berbers are widely distributed in most parts of west North Africa but primarily reside in Morocco and Algeria.²

For about thirty years, from 710 to 740 CE, the Kahina successfully halted the advance of Islam in North Africa. The legend of the Kahina has assumed many forms since the queen's reign. Arab historians and chroniclers have told her story, she has been recollected in Berber folktales and legends, and she has also been remembered by Berber historians writing in Arabic and in the Berber languages.³ The Kahina, in the long history of her legend, has taken on nearly every religious and cultural guise imaginable. She remains a figure steeped in myth, and the identifications of the Kahina with various religious and cultural trends in North Africa has had an astonishing range.

THE BERBERS IN HISTORY

In order to investigate the Kahina, we must provide her a context by undertaking a brief historical view of the Berbers, who have had a presence in North Africa for all of recorded history. Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sources noted them.⁴ But the name Berber is not a self-designation. It comes from the Roman world and was adopted from the Greek *Barbari*, the root of the English word "barbarian," which in this context indicates a person or group not of Greco-Roman origin.⁵ As the name indicates, for much of their history the Berbers lived on the periphery of larger powers between Egypt and the Atlantic Ocean that were prone to invasion because of their relative lack of natural defense and their easy access to the Mediterranean Sea. A dizzying array of invaders conquered traditional Berber lands: the Phoenicians, who founded Carthage, the Greeks, who settled in what is today's Libya, and the Romans, Vandals, Alans, Byzantine Greeks, and in modern times, the Ottoman Turks, French, and Spanish. In those areas where foreign rule was absent or incomplete, such as the inaccessible highlands of Morocco, we still find the Berbers who have been least influenced by outside cultures in the largest numbers.

The Berbers inhabited much of Roman North Africa, and there are indications that many upper-class Berbers became Romanized. There were

social and economic incentives to turn to Rome, and people who did were often rewarded for their loyalty with the valuable gift of Roman citizenship. But most of the Berbers were marginally influenced by Rome or only influenced in ways similar to other remote outposts of the Empire, like Britain and Gaul: a core, urban elite were Romanized but in the countryside resided the strongholds of pre-Roman Berber culture. When Rome embraced Christianity, North Africa became at least nominally Christian, but North African provinces with high populations of Berbers probably retained their overall pagan orientation.⁶ So, on the verge of its collapse, Roman North Africa was a diverse place; many peoples lived within its borders, and while some were Romanized, most were not. Many were Christian, but most remained pagans. Even the Christianity practiced in North Africa was far from homogenous. The Donatist Christian movement, founded by a Roman Berber and eventually declared heretical by the Church in Rome, was popular in the fourth and fifth centuries in Roman North Africa.⁷ The fractured nature of the Church has long been viewed by scholars as the major cause of the almost complete disappearance of Christianity in North Africa (with the exception of the Coptic Christians in Egypt) after the Arab invasion in 639 CE. The number of African bishoprics fell from two hundred when the Byzantines ruled North Africa to forty at the beginning of the eighth century, to five in the middle of the eleventh, and only two in 1076 CE, the year of the last contact of an African bishop with Rome.⁸ Some Christians were probably Berbers. In fact, Saint Augustine, a Bishop of Hippo in Carthage, was probably a Berber on his mother's side. But how far Christianity spread among the Berbers is unknown. Certainly, the ties that bound them to the faith were not strong, or the pressures to convert to Islam were stronger because shortly after the Arab conquest, most Berbers converted to the faith of their conquerors.

THE COMPLICATED CASE OF THE JEWISH BERBERS

There have been Jews living in North Africa since remote antiquity. In the first century CE there were perhaps a million Jews living in Egypt alone.⁹ And all along the coast of the Mediterranean, most major cities had a Jewish population of some size. So until recently, many influential scholars saw the influence of Judaism on the Berbers as quite extensive. Paul Wexler, a linguist at Tel Aviv University, claimed in his book *The Non-Jewish Origins of the Sephardic Jews* that most Sephardic Jews (Jews who originally came from Spain) were descended from Berber converts.¹⁰ But scholars

like Wexler often underestimate the fluidity between groups in antiquity and the inadequacies of our modern categories to capture that mutability.

The same problem presents itself when studying Jewish Berbers, and we have to keep this in mind when we examine the shifting identities of the Kahina, the Berber "Jewish" Queen. Despite the difficulties, there are strong hints in Arab sources that tribes of Berbers, or peoples whom we can assume were Berbers, had become Jews. We know of such groups primarily from Arab writers. The first is al-Idrisi, a famous geographer born in Ceuta on the Moroccan coast. He writes of a place called Lamlam, which, from his description, had little settled human habitation. There were only two towns, and the state of their civilization, according to al-Idrisi, was quite low. "Their inhabitants—as the people of their district point out—are Jews, among which there is much ignorance and unbelief."¹¹ He tells us when the "Jews" of Lamlam reach maturity, tattoos are burned on their foreheads and temples. Idrisi also writes of other Jews living in western Sudan. He explains that two groups, known as the Banu Zaghawa and Banu Lamtuna, are said to be Jews, and that just like the Jews of Lamlam, these two groups have "beliefs that are confused; they have no settled, agreed beliefs"¹² or a king. Owing primarily to their warlike ways, they are eventually subjugated by their neighbors and seek refuge in the mountains. Unfortunately, there is no other evidence of these Jewish groups in any other source than the writings of al-Idrisi. We simply do not know to what people he is referring, or whether they were Jews by any broad definition.

Another writer who mentions Jewish Berber tribes is Ibn Abi Zar', who reports that near Fez at the end of the eighth century lived two tribes of Berber Banu Zanata and that their religious affiliations were fractured among Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and pagan religions.¹³

However, the main source of proof of the Jewish Berbers' existence comes from Ibn Khaldun, who lived nearly seven hundred years after the Islamic conquest of North Africa and wrote works about Berber history in the pre-Islamic era. In a section where he offers a survey of various Berber tribes, Khaldun, in a somewhat cautious fashion, explains it is possible that "some of these [tribes of] Berbers adhered to the Jewish religion."¹⁴ He speculates that they adopted Judaism from the Children of Israel between the time of the expansion of the Jewish kingdom to the vicinity of Syria and their rule over it in biblical times. He claims that this *may* have been the case with the Jarawa Tribe, a Berber people of the Aures Mountains who were ruled by the Kahina. Khaldun briefly explains that she "... was killed by the Arabs at the beginning of the conquest."¹⁵ Khaldun's speculation is the primary source for nearly all the assertions that the Kahina was Jewish.

We will examine the characterizations of the Kahina in the various Arab and Berber sources in the next section. But first, we will briefly look at some other examples of possible Jewish Berbers in North Africa. Khaldun enumerates several other tribes who may have been Jews. The assertions of Khaldun and his predecessors are important sources of information about the existence of Berber Jews, but intriguing circumstantial evidence of such groups, especially following the tenth century, also exists. With the rise of Berber Islamic Dynasties like the Almohads (founded in the twelfth century CE), who had little tolerance for Jews or Christians in their lands,¹⁶ many Jews may have fled for lands to the south. This movement of people would explain some intriguing facts. When Sephardic Jews settled along the Mediterranean coast following their expulsion from Spain in the fifteenth century, they began to communicate with Jews who lived in the interior of North Africa. These Jewish communities were autonomous and engaged in commerce between Mediterranean ports and the inhabitants of the Sahara Desert. Apparently, these Jewish groups had become so estranged from Judaism that in the words of one rabbi, they were Jews in name only.¹⁷ Perhaps here were successors of Khaldun's Jewish Berbers.

As with the other autonomous Jewish groups we have explored, especially those dwelling on the periphery of more settled areas, the story of the Kahina's Jewishness may be a historical grain of sand embedded in layers of myth. As we saw, stories of Jewish kingdoms in Africa were told by the mysterious Eldad ha-Dani in the second half of the ninth century. His tales were used to substantiate claims for Jewish kingdoms all over Africa, and rumors of the sort we saw above, in the Arab sources about Jewish Berbers, spread the currency of this idea.

In 1526 CE, a man named David Reubeni appeared in Portugal and called himself the commander of the army of his brother Joseph, a Jewish king ruling over the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in Morocco. Reubeni is a mysterious character in medieval history. He told fabulous tales of Jewish kingdoms, which were widely believed, and was given access to the courts of Europe, even visiting Pope Clement the VIII.¹⁸ During this time, rumors of a Jewish kingdom, or a collection of independent Jewish tribes, circulated around the Portuguese court. One letter found in the court's archives tells a fascinating tale of independent Jews who were identified as Beni-Musha, or Sons of Moses. Their story features many miraculous elements, including deep-water wells that moved along with their caravans.¹⁹

Even with the approach of modern times, stories of independent Jewish groups in North Africa continued to be told and retold. A story of a

Jewish kingdom in the Dar'a Valley was written down in the seventeenth century. This kingdom, comprising descendants of Ephraim, the son of Joseph, kept Christian black Africans as slaves. In the story, the slaves rebel against the Jews, and the valley is divided between Christians and Jews, but eventually, Muslims settle in the valley, and with the complicity of the Christians, they are able to defeat and subjugate the Jews.²⁰ Another tale was told in the seventeenth century about a Jewish merchant, Ibn Mash'al, who imposed his authority over Muslims, levied taxes upon them, and took a Muslim virgin for his harem each year. The tale ends when a certain al-Rashid, the founder of the Alawite Dynasty (1666–1672 CE), rises up in revolt and kills Mash'al.²¹

Stories of autonomous Jewish tribes and kingdoms circulated in North Africa for many centuries. They varied with time and place, but most originated from Jewish sources. The motivations for telling these stories were probably similar to other examples we have encountered: they gave a powerless people a measure of prestige and hope and perhaps provided a cautionary note to Muslim rulers who considered persecuting the brethren of the powerful Jewish tribes in the wastelands to the south. The Berbers were a powerful, independent people, well-known for their fierce resistance to Arab dominance. So the idea of Berber Jews lent even greater prestige to the Jewish kingdoms of lore and fable.

THE KAHINA IN NORTH AFRICAN MYTH

The origin of the Kahina's name is mysterious, but several suggestions have been made, including the feminine version of *kohan*, the Hebrew word for priest. A more likely origin of the name is the Arab word for "soothsayer" or "sorceress," and as we shall see, in many legends she is portrayed as just this. The Kahina's political career ended between 693 and 702 CE, when she was killed by the Muslim general Hassan b. al-Nu'man in his second attempt to conquer her lands. It was only in the ninth century, one hundred and fifty years after her purported death, that the earliest narratives about her were written. So stories about the Kahina were most likely told orally much earlier, as part of the stock of folktales in North Africa about the Arab invasion. She became a nexus in the examination of relations between the Arabs and Berbers in North Africa, and as such, her role evolved through time to meet the current challenges of those telling her story.

The earliest tales of the Kahina were related by Waqidi (d. 822) in a work now lost but paraphrased in a later book by a historian of the thir-

teenth century. Waqidi writes that the Kahina ruled the whole of North Africa and “inflicted on its inhabitants awful punishments. She brutally oppressed them.”²² He goes on to tell how a Muslim army is sent out to defeat the Kahina but are themselves defeated, and how later, a larger army is sent to reengage the Kahina, and they defeat her army and kill her and her sons. There are a few other, equally concise accounts from the ninth century about the Kahina, and they all agree about the facts that the situation in North Africa was grave before the arrival of Islam and that the people of North Africa were being mistreated under the tyrannical rule of a non-Muslim, female ruler.

These early accounts of the Kahina were written by Arabs living outside North Africa. They were probably told to express an ideology that the Muslim community had developed about its military endeavors—the armed variety of *jihad*—during the century after the death of the Prophet. Such armed expeditions were not undertaken for material gain or power. Islam, as a religion of peace, only sought to restore peace to the earth. It was rulers like the Kahina, who were non-Muslims (and in her case, even more damning, also female), who bred chaos and disorder in the world. According to this view, the conquest of Africa was not the subjugation of one people by another, but quite the opposite: The arrival of Islam was not meant to subjugate the Berbers, but to convert them in order to grant them new freedom.²³

Of course, the Berbers’ perspective on the Arab invasion was quite different than that of the Arabs. Despite the high-minded rhetoric on the Arab side, the conquerors displayed an arrogant attitude toward the Berbers, and apparently there was a large amount of literature, including forged *hadiths*, or traditions about the Prophet, which portrayed Berbers in a negative light.²⁴ Eventually, as the Berbers were converted to Islam, they were recruited into Muslim armies and took a prominent role (at least in terms of sheer numbers) in the conquest of Spain and Sicily. When they subsequently began to gain the upper hand over their Arab overlords,²⁵ accounts of the Kahina were transformed into more pro-Berber versions.

The historian Ibn Abd al-Hakam (d. 871) began this trend. Although not from North Africa, he founded the so-called Maghribi school of historiography, personally traveling to Egypt to interview people who often related accounts of the Arab conquest of North Africa. In Hakam’s narrative of the Kahina, she becomes a softer figure. She defeats General Hassan’s Muslim expedition and takes many of his companions prisoner, but the Kahina treats them well, and even adopts one—Khalid b. Yazid al-Absi—as her son. The Kahina’s adoption of Khalid becomes crucial to all subsequent stories about her. Hakim recounts that the Muslim commander General

Hassan writes to Khalid for information about the Kahina. Khalid replies and sends the message out wrapped in a piece of bread. The Kahina, in her role as a prophetess, predicts her downfall, shouting, “O my sons, your ruin is in what people eat.”²⁶ Later Khalid writes another message to General Hassan and puts it into the knob of a saddle. Again the Kahina goes out and repeats to her sons that their ruin is hidden in an object made of dead plants. One day she arrives and asks her sons what they see in the sky. They reply that they only see red clouds, and she tells them they are wrong, that they see the approaching Arab cavalry. She implores Khalid to go to the Arabs and secure the lives of her two sons and after some reluctance, he agrees.²⁷

So the captivity and adoption of Khalid became a vital plot device in the new Kahina tales. For one, it accounts for the Berber complicity in the Arab invasion. It also explains the rapid advance the Berbers made in claiming Islam as their own and forming homegrown Muslim Berber dynasties. Hakam’s account of the Kahina clearly differs considerably from the previous ones. The main differences are her adoption of Khalid, the correspondence between Khalid and General Hassan, the Kahina’s prophetic predictions of the future, and the protection given to her two natural sons by the Arabs. Hakam’s account also includes some elements told in previous tales about the Kahina: she was a block against Islam’s civilizing influence, she was an illegitimate ruler, and to a lesser degree, her rule created social chaos. But in his story, the vital cooperation of her sons in the mission to bring Islam to the Berbers becomes paramount.

Hakam also suggests the original home of the Berbers was Palestine. In fact, their king was Goliath, the giant killed by David. After the death of their revered king, his people fled for North Africa. So for Hakam, the Semitic origins of the Berbers explained the Kahina’s sons’ rapid adherence to Islam and in a wider sense, the rapid conversion of the Berbers to Islam. He maintains that the arrival of the Arabs and their conquest of the Berbers is not an event that occurred between two alien peoples, but quite the contrary: the Berbers and the Arabs had been bound by genetic kinship.

From Hakam’s account forward, the legend of the Kahina increasingly relied on the theme of sorcery. The Kahina was known for her great weight and her long hair, which were all stock characteristics of sorceresses. She also screamed during prophetic states and dwelled in the mountains, which were both traits common to sorceresses in folklore. She had three sons—a common number for sorceresses—and in slightly later versions of the tale, the Kahina destroyed the cities and cultivated lands of North Africa because she was convinced that the Arabs were in-

vading simply for the great wealth of the land. Again, in many folktales, sorcerers were known for devastating the fertility of land. The story that the Kahina had made North Africa a desert was a common folk theme, and it had great explanatory value: her evil deeds brought ruin to a once prosperous land.

Perhaps the greatest chronicler of the Kahina was Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406 CE), whom we met above in our discussion of Jewish Berbers. By the time he wrote of the Kahina, he had a long tradition of tales about her from which to draw. He tells the familiar Kahina story but added an important detail: based on his knowledge of the Judaization of some of the Berbers, he speculates that the Kahina was a Jew. He wrote that her tribe, the Jarawa, lived in the Aures Mountains and practiced Judaism. He also adds a context to her rise to power: she had supernatural abilities and gained the chieftainship of her people with this power. He maintains that the Caliph sent General Hassan to conquer Byzantine North Africa for Islam, and after some initial success, including the capture of Kairwan and Carthage, he suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Kahina, who was able to marshal the anti-Muslim forces in the area. She captured a great many Muslims, and adopted one—Khalid—by symbolically suckling him at her breast. In the years of her rule, she controlled a vast swath of territory from Tripoli to Tangiers. But according to Khaldun's account, her policy of destroying cities and cultivated areas to make North Africa less attractive to the Arabs backfired. When General Hassan took a second crack at the Kahina, she had lost the local support she had enjoyed during the first engagement and was killed by the invading Arabs. Her two sons defected and were converted to Islam and became Berber leaders.

THE KAHINA AND JUDAISM

Clearly, it remains difficult to establish for certain the Jewish identity of the Kahina. She fulfilled, in the long history of the telling of her tale, many roles, and despite the testimony of Khaldun, there is no way to be absolutely certain that the Kahina was a Jew. Here we are hampered by a lack of documents, as well as documents which contradict each other, and a considerable layer of fable and mythology which cloud the picture of the Kahina and her role during a pivotal time period in North African history. But the very fact that she was considered a Jew, along with the considerable circumstantial evidence of the existence of Jewish Berbers in pre-Islamic and post-Islamic North Africa, is compelling. We can see the

same trail of hints that exist in the examination of many other autonomous Jewish groups: a perceived link to the Lost Tribes of Israel, some sort of large scale conversion to Judaism of a non-Jewish people, and the establishment of an independent Jewish kingdom outside the traditional boundaries of Zion. All in all, the Jewish status of the Kahina seems supported by—if nothing else—historical innuendo.

ANOTHER ZION: THE BERBERS AND THE JEWS

The physical reality of the Kahina's other Zion is supported by slim evidence. We would like to have more sources about this fascinating character. Was she truly a Jew? Was Judaism as widespread among the Berbers as many generations of scholars believed, or was it a narrower phenomenon? Did the Kahina conceive of her victories against Islam as a victory for Judaism, for Berber freedom, or for both? Without further documents, the Kahina will remain a mysterious figure. Like most folk heroes, she was the repository of the hopes and fears of the people who told her story. One of the fantasies of many medieval Jews involved fierce, independent Jewish tribes beyond the periphery of settled territories, who in the harsh interior lands south of Morocco and the inaccessible mountains of the Atlas and the Aures knew no gentile yoke. The desire to propagate such rumors and myths, coupled with scant historical hints, fostered the notion that the Kahina was a Jew who fought against Islam and succeeded where none had before.

EIGHT

A JEWISH NATIONAL STATE: THE SOVIET JEWISH AUTONOMOUS REGION IN BIROBIDZHAN

THE FINAL OTHER ZION

Our final other Zion brings us into the modern era, although in many ways, the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) in the Soviet Far East is a curious relic of another time. The creation of the JAR in the early twentieth century was an attempt to give Soviet Jews a homeland away from the other burgeoning experiment in Jewish political autonomy in Palestine. The JAR's particular function was to "normalize" Soviet Jews: to transform a people whom the Soviet government considered as parasitic into useful Soviets. The JAR still exists as a political entity in the Russian Federation and is still functionally considered a "Jewish" region, although few Jews now live there.

Unlike our other examples, the study of the JAR is not plagued by the antiquity of its sources. The JAR was commissioned in 1927, became a reality in 1937, and mirrored a trend in the Soviet Union between the two World Wars of "autonomous" regions for its ethnic and linguistic minorities. For many Jews of the time, who still did not have an independent nation, the symbolic importance of the JAR cannot be overstated. As we shall see, the founding of the State of Israel and the founding of the JAR originated from very similar historical and social impulses. Both were attempts to settle the vexing problem of Jewish identity in the twentieth century and to finally solve the problem of Jewish political life: if Jews were a nation without a homeland, what kind of political state was right for the Jews? And more importantly, where should it be? Should it exist in the Land of Israel, which is the traditional land of the Jews, or could the Jews have a nation anywhere it was politically possible? The creators of the JAR believed they could make a Jewish homeland far from the Middle East, and they attempted its political construction on the geographical edge of the Soviet Union.

THE DREAM OF YIDDISHLAND

In a far corner of the Russian Republic, near the Manchurian border, lies a Jewish national state. With the exception of the State of Israel, it is the only municipal entity created in the twentieth century for the purpose of giving Jews a homeland.¹ It was formed by the Soviet Union a full twenty years before the founding of Israel, and it continues to exist as a political entity and Jewish homeland, bearing the official name of the “Jewish Autonomous Region,” or JAR. Yet for all its real and symbolic importance, few people know of its existence.

The JAR was a competitor of the Zionist vision of political autonomy in Palestine. It was a product of a powerful movement that sought a contemporary version of Jewish political and cultural autonomy in a socialist context. Like our other examples, this was a vision that did not include the traditional territory associated with Jewish political freedom—the Land of Israel—and also unlike modern Zionism did not feature Hebrew as the language of its people and institutions. Instead, this movement focused on the Yiddish language. The drive to give Yiddish a centrality in the life of Eastern European Jews was called the Yiddishist Movement, or Diaspora Nationalism—or Goles Nationalism in Yiddish. The JAR was the only physical fulfillment of the Yiddishist dream of an autonomous homeland for Jews away from the traditional bounds of Zion, though it failed to live up to its lofty promise, mostly because the JAR became bound up with the schizophrenic ethnic polities of Joseph Stalin. But despite its shortcomings, the JAR provided a final competitor with Zion and the last attempt to solve the Jewish question outside the Holy Land. As a moving force in Jewish life, Yiddishism was once extremely powerful. That it eventually failed tells us less about its own strength than about the ferocity of the powers that sought to destroy it.

MAME LOSHN

To fully appreciate the novel experiment of the JAR, we must quickly explore the background of the Yiddish language, its literature, its place in European Jewish life, and its transformations in modern times.

Yiddish is an Indo-European language of Germanic origin. In Yiddish, the word “Yiddish” means “Jewish.” In traditional Ashkenazi European Jewish lore, it was known as *mame loshn*, or the Mother Tongue, a term that has both literal and symbolic meanings. Yiddish was known as the “Mother Tongue” because for much of its history it was considered the

language of the home, of women, and of people who could not understand Hebrew, which was called *loshn koydesh*, or the Holy Tongue, and was given a more prominent position of respect in Ashkenazi Jewish life. The term *mame loshn* is a term made of two words derived from two languages: the first, *mame*, means "Mother" in Yiddish, and the second, *loshn*, means "tongue" or "language" in Hebrew. This term is very indicative of Yiddish's hybrid nature. Although the language is nearly 80 percent Germanic in origin, the remainder of its words were imported from four sources: Romance, Hebrew, Aramaic and later, Slavic.² The wide geographical sources of the language illustrate the movement of the Jewish peoples who spoke Yiddish. Around the turn of the first millennium, Jewish groups who spoke a type of early French, known by historians of language as Romance,³ began to migrate to what is the Rhine Valley of today's Germany. There they began to speak the Germanic tongue of the region, but certain Romance words remained in their speech, and can still be heard in Yiddish today.⁴ This proto-Yiddish was probably very much like the language of the gentile Germans who surrounded the newly arrived Jews, but because of the close familiarity of Jews with the languages of their liturgy, sacred books, and in many cases, legal and business contracts, a great many Hebrew and Aramaic words and expressions also penetrated early Yiddish and would be slowly transformed into different pronunciations and meanings.

With time, this proto-Yiddish began to become something quite distinct from the German languages that surrounded it. It included a great many Romance words, carried from lands to the west, and also some Hebrew and Aramaic. There is no doubt that these Jewish communities traded and communicated with their German gentile neighbors. But under the unique pressures of Jewish communal life, the German language used by Jews was transformed into something unique and eventually became Yiddish: it was the German language of the Jews, quite distinct from the German of the gentiles, and with time, the gap between the two would grow wider.

With increasing persecution of the Jews in the Rhine region, these proto-Yiddish speakers began to move to the east, to lands like Poland, where they were invited by reigning monarchs to settle largely for the economic benefits they would bring. Their Yiddish followed them and absorbed another layer of loan words from Slavic languages.⁵ As speakers of a Germanic tongue in Slavic lands, Yiddish speakers became even more isolated from the gentiles who surrounded them, which set Yiddish and German (and its various dialects) on even more widely separated linguistic courses. And more importantly, it sealed the fate of Yiddish in the

eyes of many as a polyglot tongue: impure and composite. For centuries, it was called by Jews the “Jargon,” and this impure vision of Yiddish was typically compared to Hebrew, which was considered a “pure” tongue. Yiddish was much maligned in segments of the Jewish world because of its impure connotations and its use by women and “illiterates” who could not master Hebrew. As Jews became integrated into European culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the language became firmly associated with the traditional Jewish life of the *shtetls*, or poor Jewish hamlets in Poland, Russia, and Eastern Europe. For men like Herzl and Ahad Ha’am, whom we examined in the first chapter, Yiddish was the embodiment of many of the ills of Jewish culture that they wished to eradicate or remedy.⁶

Yet the diagnosis of Yiddish as pathological distorts the real-life use and wide distribution of the language. As Jews entered the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the language of nearly eleven million people—some three-quarters of the world’s Jews. The extent to which its enemies fulminated against it is a tribute to its far range and vibrancy. In reality, it was not merely the language of women and the illiterate, but also the medium of study for religious Jews for nearly one thousand years. The traditional method of study among Ashkenazi Jews was to read a passage or line in the Torah, Talmud, or Mishnah and then translate and discuss it in Yiddish.⁷ In this way the language became intricately tied to a system of pedagogy and was further bound to the traditional Jewish world in Eastern Europe. The enemies of Yiddish considered this yet another black mark against the language. They denigrated the language as the tongue of the rabbis and Chasidim of Eastern European Judaism. Yiddish, like the yeshiva study house, the *shtetl*, the Talmud, and the ritual bath, was seen as yet another retarding element in Jewish life. Yiddish was an anathema both to assimilationists who wanted to see the Yiddish-speaking masses integrated into a greater European culture and to Zionists who wished to create a new Jew, speaking a robust Hebrew in a Jewish state. But as we will see, Yiddish, long-maligned among Jewish intellectuals, later became the avenue of a great cultural explosion.

A NATION OF WORDS

Paradoxically, the first stirrings of a “modern” Yiddish movement began with an initiative of its enemies. The Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment movement, began in Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and took an entirely negative view of Yiddish.⁸ At about

this time period, Chasidic religious factions were spreading through Eastern Europe and Russia. Chasidism was in part a revolt against rationalism and rabbinical authority and stressed charismatic leadership, ecstatic prayer, and direct communion with God. For most Eastern European Jews, this communication could only take place in Yiddish.⁹ So while Jews in Western and Central Europe, under the influence of the Haskalah, denigrated Yiddish in favor of German and Hebrew, Chasidism began to venerate Yiddish. They began to see it as more than a means to an end—they believed that the language of women and the illiterate was God’s own language. The Haskalah, therefore, was in a bind: in order to reach the untutored masses with information about the benefits of what they believed was their more progressive form of Judaism, they needed to address the people in their own language, which meant, of course, conducting outreach in Yiddish. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was very little formal writing in Yiddish. Translations of the Bible existed, as well as moral commentaries and prayer books, but little was written in Yiddish in the way of “secular” literature. So the Haskalah, in order to undermine Yiddish and everything that it stood for, decided they temporarily needed to elevate that very language. So early Haskalah leaders began to write in the hated jargon—what they believed to be the jumbled language of their coreligionists of Eastern Europe—and in the process they unwittingly transformed Yiddish.

Yiddish, like many languages, has a variety of dialects. Spread out over an area stretching from Germany to Russia, Yiddish dialects can often be mutually incomprehensible—or only comprehensible with considerable effort on the part of their speakers.¹⁰ So when the Haskalah leaders decided to write in Yiddish, they had to choose which dialect to use; since there were no grammar or dictionaries in Yiddish, they also had to decide on matters like spelling. When Haskalah writers made these decisions, they unintentionally standardized Yiddish by choosing one dialect or form of spelling, and by default, giving it prestige.¹¹ In the process, they created a common Yiddish literary medium that all Yiddish readers and speakers could understand. But more importantly, they began to shift the Yiddish lexicon away from the religious and the domestic sphere and into the wider conceptual world. Some Haskalah figures wrote Yiddish plays critical of traditional Eastern European Jews. They felt they could not write such plays in German, for they were afraid the works would stir up anti-Semitic feelings in German audiences—nor could they write them in Hebrew, their preferred language, since Hebrew was not widely known. They had no choice but to write their plays in Yiddish, which further broadened the language’s horizons.¹²

Eventually, members of the Haskalah who were more partial to Yiddish came on the scene, and they saw in the language the potential for more than a means to modernize Jewish life. They saw in Yiddish the capacity to be its own agency of modernization, and these early figures began to preach a kind of proto-Yiddishism that would fully flower later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But these early Yiddishists were few and far between. The vast majority of assimilated, Central and Western European Jews had nothing but contempt for the jargon of their ancestors.

But by 1850, Yiddish books of a purely secular nature began to be published in some numbers. Finally, after fifty years of proselytizing, and as the Industrial Revolution began to make inroads into Eastern Europe, secular Yiddish began to find its own voice. More important still, there began to be a wide readership in “Yiddishland,” a territory that was diverse, stretching across nearly a dozen nation-states. Jews started to imagine themselves in the same way as many other ethnic minorities in Europe: as members of a nation, even if they were currently subsumed by the larger empires of mid-to-late nineteenth century Central and Eastern Europe. The idea began to dawn on certain Yiddish intellectuals that something like ethnic, linguistic, and national self-determination for Yiddish-speaking Jews was possible in Europe, just as it could be possible for Serbs, Romanians, Irish, and Ukrainians—all people whose lands were controlled by foreign powers. The notion that there could be an entity like “Yiddishland” that was something more than strictly conceptual began to gain currency.

YIDDISHISM ON THE RISE AND THE LANGUAGE WARS

The same social and historical forces that gave rise to Zionism (which were examined in the first chapter)¹³ also propelled Yiddishism and Diaspora Nationalism, or the idea that Jews could and should have some sort of national autonomy in their lands of exile, particularly in areas where a sizable number of inhabitants were Jews. From the mid-nineteenth century until the First World War, the map of continental Europe was dominated by large, multiethnic empires—the most notable of which were the Hapsburg-Austrian and Czarist-Russian Empires. Within these empires, diverse peoples were represented or underrepresented according to the whims of royal prerogative. However, the trend was definitely toward the decentralization of these states, as more and more ethnic and language groups clamored for greater control of their own destinies.

Judaism has always contained an ethnic component. Rabbinical Jews considered themselves a nation in exile, and the systems and institutions they developed helped to maintain a sense of separateness from the peoples surrounding them. However, a national sense did not develop in any modern way. The traditional Jewish idea of nationhood was overwhelmingly religious and messianic: Jews were a nation of priests and Israelites living in exile and awaiting the Messiah to restore them to their Holy Land. It was, above all, a supernatural nationalism. Except for obeying the Torah, the individual Jew could do little to hasten the coming of the Messiah and his or her return to the Holy Land.¹⁴

A more modern Jewish nationalism developed in the nineteenth century that led to radically changing answers to that old question, "Who is a Jew?" Rather than a religious question, the notion of who was a Jew became increasingly ethnic, and by extension, linguistic. This shift was an expression of the changing nature of ethnic consciousness in the greater European scene. More ethnic and language groups were pressing for their rights. There was a greater sense of the right of language groups to express themselves in their own tongues, to educate their children in their own schools, and to a greater or lesser degree, to control their own political destinies through their own political institutions. In this climate, Jews began to press for the same recognition as other European ethnic and language groups.

But for Jews, the choice of language was not as easy as for other ethnic and language groups. The early precursors of the Zionists pushed for Hebrew as the national language of the Jews, and since the language question and the territory question went hand-in-glove, they supported Palestine as the national homeland of the Jews. The appeal of Hebrew was self-evident: nearly every Jewish group in the world, from North America to India, had some connection with the ancient tongue. It was a common linguistic denominator for world Jewry, and as such, it could be used as a tool to meld the diverse people or peoples who called themselves Jews and lived literally scattered throughout the world. There was also a strong historical connection to the language: it was the ancient tongue of the Jewish people and the language originally used in independent Jewish states in the Holy Land and the mythical account of its history as recorded in the Bible.¹⁵

But Hebrew in the nineteenth century was not a spoken language. Biblical Hebrew, the favorite of the Haskalah, was largely a literary language, with a small vocabulary of eight thousand words incapable of expressing even the simplest modern exigency. A later variety of Hebrew—called Rabbinical or Mishnaic Hebrew—had a wider and more expansive vocabulary

and grammar. But the early figures of the Haskalah and Zionism looked down on this form of Hebrew for much the same reason as they did Yiddish: it was a language of traditional Jewish studies and connected to the “effeminate” world of Yiddish and its rabbis. They wrongly believed Mishnaic Hebrew to be a hybrid of Hebrew and Aramaic and incorrectly saw it as a “technical” language created by the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud. All of these assumptions were fervently believed and retarded the growth of spoken Hebrew.¹⁶ How could there be a national revival with a language that no one spoke and that was incapable of adjusting itself to the complexities of modern life? For the early Hebraists, this was a vexing problem.

Yiddish presented no such difficulty. By the time this new sense of Jewish nationalism was emerging in Europe, Yiddish was a living language spoken by nearly eleven million people. But even at this later date, Yiddish had image problems. It was not viewed as the national language of the Jews, even though a vast majority of the world’s Jews spoke and used it in daily life. And as Zionism became increasingly militant in its tone, Yiddish was increasingly put on the defensive. According to the more strident Zionists, Yiddish was a symptom of the sickness of the Diaspora. The “jargon” reflected the slavish mentality of the people who spoke it and who could only be normalized by a return to their ancestral homeland of Israel and to the language of their ancestors: Hebrew.¹⁷

From the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War, Jewish intellectuals were profoundly occupied with their own version of the Jewish Question. They believed something was fundamentally wrong with the Jewish people, and they sought a variety of remedies. There existed, at first, three sizable camps: the Zionists, whom we have met, and who advocated a return to Palestine and Hebrew as the language of a new nation of Jews; the assimilationists, who believed that Jews should be subsumed into wider European culture and lose all Jewish identity; and the Yiddishists, who sought Jewish cultural and political autonomy in Europe, under the umbrella of the Yiddish language.

With rising anti-Semitism in Europe during the approach of the twentieth century, assimilation quickly became a dead end.¹⁸ In the new answer to “Who is a Jew?” religion was no longer as large a factor as ethnicity. Even if an individual Jew converted away from or renounced Judaism, he or she was still a Jew. So the war was waged between the Zionists and the Yiddishists, and for some time in the early history of the struggle, it was unclear who would win. Outwardly a struggle about language, the dispute actually ran far deeper. Zionism was associated with upper class and bourgeois Jewish culture (and early on, Western and Central European Jewish culture) while the Yiddishists hailed primarily from Eastern

Europe. Yiddish was the language of the toiling Jewish masses, both in factories in the cities and on farms in the countryside; so the Yiddishist movement was representative of the working class. Of course, as in every sweeping distinction, there were counterinstances. Labor Zionism advocated a socialist system for the new Jewish state, while some of the early Yiddishists, like Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) advocated not a socialist solution for the Jewish problem, but a democratic Jewish self-government within the framework of a multinational state.¹⁹ In fact, all of these movements were marked by a high degree of plurality. But early in the struggle, the Yiddishists held the social momentum. They represented the large, poor, laboring, and generally dissatisfied mass of Eastern European Jews. And as these Jews became increasingly urban, the old folk and religious ways of the *shtetl* loosened their hold. Jews were thrust into modernity, but with few exceptions, wider European culture did not accept them. For one, most Jews did not speak the languages of their host countries. They spoke Yiddish, and even when they learned Polish, Russian, or Romanian, at least in the first generation, they had a distinguishing accent. So Jews in Eastern Europe were forced to fall back on their own resources and did so in the language at hand: Yiddish.

Perhaps the greatest factor that led to Yiddish's rehabilitation was the growth of its literature. One of the frequent criticisms of Yiddish (both from its enemies and often from its friends) was that it did not have a great literary tradition. Yiddish had no Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Dante. In fact, before the modern era, there was little at all in the way of Yiddish literature. Modern forms of Western written expression, like the novel and the short story, did not penetrate the Eastern European Jewish world of Yiddish until relatively late. And even when they did, early figures in Yiddish letters mainly wrote short fiction, which meshed well with the folk tradition of previous generations of Yiddish storytellers.²⁰

The first great figure in Yiddish letters was named Solomon Rabinovich (1859–1916), known by his pen name: Sholom Aleichem (based on the Yiddishized-Hebrew greeting, "Peace Be Upon You"). Best known to the world though his character Tevye the Dairyman, who became popular through the play and movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, Sholom Aleichem was immensely successful. His stories were widely read and translated into other languages. When he died in New York in 1916 at the age of fifty-nine, his funeral was attended by tens of thousands of people and received world attention.²¹

As Yiddish literature moved forward, it adopted and adapted Western styles of expression, just as the rest of Yiddish popular culture also molded itself on a Western model. By the end of the nineteenth century,

most Eastern European and Russian cities with sizeable Yiddish populations boasted thriving newspapers that expressed a variety of political persuasions. But for the Yiddishists, socialism became the most prominent political trend, particularly in Eastern Europe. Socialism began to make inroads in Russia starting in 1870. Jewish socialists joined their ranks, but many soon found that the anti-Semitism prevalent in wider Russian culture was also found in its socialist groups.

This prompted the formation in 1897 of the very influential Jewish Labor Bund. Outwardly, the Bundists were a socialist labor group for Jews, promoting workers' rights. But they became increasingly cultural and began to push a Yiddishist agenda, calling for the cultural autonomy of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Europe. The Bund even became militant in the years following the Gomel pogroms of 1903, when they organized self-defense forces. Yet the Bund never called for political autonomy for Yiddish-speaking Jews. As socialists, this smacked too much of the kind of nationalistic chauvinism they ideologically opposed. As we will see, this firm conjunction of Yiddishism and socialism, of labor unions and the right of the workers to use their native language, became crucial in the Soviet experiment in the JAR.

The Yiddishist movement was inhabited by colorful characters who worked tirelessly for its promotion. One of the most fascinating was Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937), a profoundly influential man who helped to shape (paradoxically, considering how both movements would evolve) both Zionism and Yiddishism.

Like many Jewish men and women of his generation, he was born into a religious family. His father was the son of Galician Chasidim and had come to Vienna from Cracow, while his mother was descended from a respected rabbinical family in Hungary. Birnbaum received a largely secular education in state-run elementary and grammar schools and was tutored about Jewish subjects at home.²² He kept company with assimilated Jews in his early years but eventually was won over to the Zionist cause. He began to believe that Jews were not truly a religious group but rather a nation that should attempt to regain its ancestral land in Palestine. Birnbaum was heavily influenced by early Hebrew and Zionist journals—particularly the publication of Leon Pinsker's *Auto-Emancipation: A Warning of a Russian Jew to his Brethren*. This work was an analysis of anti-Semitism and an appeal for a return to Jewish political and territorial autonomy as the only remedy for the urgent existential crisis facing European Jews.²³

When Birnbaum entered the University of Vienna in 1883, he helped form a student Jewish nationalist organization a full decade before Herzl appeared on the Zionist scene. Over the next few years, Birnbaum wrote

extensively about the cause of a Jewish state in Palestine and founded his own journal, called *Kadimah*. In 1890, he coined the word “Zionism,” and later, the term “political Zionism.” He wrote against the evils of assimilation and of the backwardness of traditional Jewish religious culture. He became a lawyer in 1885, but in a profession rife with anti-Semitism, he was unable to advance, and he eventually decided to pursue the Zionist cause exclusively. He was even invited by Theodor Herzl to deliver an address about the situation of Jewish culture at the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897.²⁴

Birnbaum was poised to become one of the leading figures in Zionism, but after the first Congress, differences between he and Herzl began to strain his relationship with Zionism. Like some Zionists at the time, Birnbaum had a low opinion of Herzl and viewed him as little more than a power-hungry despot. At first, Birnbaum expressed his rejection of Herzl from within the Zionist camp. But following the second Zionist Congress in 1898, after Herzl opposed Birnbaum’s reelection as Secretary General, Birnbaum severed his ties with Zionism.²⁵

At that point, Birnbaum changed the direction of his life’s current. He had, up to that point, preached a more or less orthodox Zionist line. He had proclaimed that there was no such thing as “normal” Jewish culture in exile: that long years of statelessness had destroyed the Jewish people and rendered them a class rather than a nation. But upon leaving Zionism, Birnbaum began to rethink this position. He asserted that it was not necessary to recreate a “normal” Jewish people, since one existed already. From these musings, Birnbaum developed the concept of Diaspora or Goles Nationalism. From 1902 to 1905 Birnbaum worked on a theory of non-Zionist nationalism which he called, in German, *Alljudentum* (Pan-Judaism). He sought to further Jewish national and cultural life in the large Jewish population centers of Europe. Birnbaum felt Diaspora Nationalism could work along with the increasing self-consciousness of ethnic minorities in Europe, who were working through emergent parliaments in European states to secure their rights. With this in mind, he got involved in Austrian politics, and along with other non-Zionist Austrian Jews, founded the *Juedischer Volksverein*, or the Jewish People’s Association, to further pursue the Diaspora Nationalist goals in Austrian politics.²⁶ Birnbaum also participated in a multiethnic movement that sought cultural autonomy for various language groups in the Hapsburg Empire. However, his bid for a seat as a representative from eastern Galicia in the *Reichsrat*, or Austrian Parliament, was unsuccessful. Despite a strong showing among both Jews and Ukrainians in the region, he simply failed to garner enough votes.

After his defeat, Birnbaum turned his attention more toward the question of language. He began to press the cause of Yiddish language and Yiddish culture, coining the term "Yiddishism" and "Yiddishist." He translated works by Sholom Aleichem and other prominent Yiddish writers into German, and in 1905 established *Yidishe Kultur*, the first student organization devoted to the furtherance of Yiddish culture.²⁷ But strangely, Birnbaum did not know very much Yiddish. He set about to master it, and eventually did, but his early ignorance of the language hindered his leadership of the Yiddishist movement.

Birnbaum traveled extensively to promote the idea of a Yiddish Diaspora nationalism. He spoke in America about the cause but received little attention. However, he did meet a group of confirmed Yiddishists, and together with such figures as Chaim Zhitlovsky, conceived of an international conference on behalf of the Yiddishist cause. The site of the conference was Czernowitz, in the Bukovina part of the Austrian Empire, so the meeting was known afterward as the Czernowitz Conference.

The Czernowitz Conference was well-attended but also marred by much political infighting. The conference was subject to ridicule, since the delegates were divided over one essential point: whether Yiddish should be declared "the" language of world Jewry, or simply "a" language. In the face of the Yiddishists' lofty and grand goals for the Jewish people, this quarrel appeared petty and inconsequential.²⁸

During the conference, Birnbaum was jeered for his imperfect knowledge of Yiddish, and when he tried to give an address in German, he was forced to stop by the audience of ardent Yiddishists. But despite all the unseemly behavior, the conference and the efforts of Birnbaum and his contemporaries put Yiddishism on the map. For the years following the conference, Yiddishism combined with Goles Nationalism was a serious contender along with Zionism as a "solution" to the "Jewish problem."

Of course, the great "Yiddishland" of Europe would be pitted against a greater obstacle than Zionism and Hebraism as the twentieth century marched forward. Birnbaum could not see that anti-Semitism, which he believed would lessen or be eradicated as socialistic and democratic institutions swept Europe, was about to take center stage in Europe, and in twelve short years would eradicate much of almost one thousand years of Yiddish cultural, religious, and social life. Birnbaum's kind of naiveté was understandable, given the singular nature of the Holocaust. It was also a sign of the times: that people could create a more just and equitable society was not doubted by many people of Birnbaum's generation. We must also remember that at this time Goles Nationalism was less remote a possibility than Zionism, which was much flouted as no more than Utopianism. The idea

that the Jews could reestablish a state of their own in the Holy Land, with Hebrew (a dead—or at least slumbering—tongue) as its language, was far more outlandish to pre-Holocaust Jewish intellectuals than Goles Nationalism, which at least had the status of being a *de facto* reality in many regions in Eastern Europe. Now, of course, the shadow of the Holocaust, which all but destroyed the Yiddish-speaking strongholds in Eastern Europe, makes Goles Nationalism appear little more than a ghostly dream.

However, the men and women who approached these problems in the fifty years before the Holocaust did so with an amazing amount of resiliency and energy. All manner of political and social philosophies rubbed elbows in both the Zionist/Hebraist and the Yiddishist camps. It must be remembered that most Yiddishists, who were brought up in traditional religious environments, knew Hebrew, and very many Hebraists, including radical ones like Ahad Ha'am, could also count Yiddish as their first language. There was a great deal of fluidity between the two camps, which may explain the strength of invective on both sides. It was a family fight: every Yiddishist was a potential Hebraist and vice versa. And if we should think that the door to old-style religious orthodoxy was closed, we must look at Nathan Birnbaum's activities in the last period of his life.

Following the First World War, Birnbaum went through yet another personal transformation. He eventually came to the conclusion that Jewish religion and culture could not be successfully separated, and he fully embraced the Jewish religion. He viewed Jewish nationalism, in any form, as a kind of Jewish-paganism, or the elevation of a national ideal at the expense of God.²⁹ So by the end of his life, Birnbaum had embraced nearly every ideology that his age could offer. He went from a nearly assimilated Jew in Austria whose family orthodoxy was quickly losing hold to an ardent supporter of Zionism and Hebraism, to a Yiddishist and Goles Nationalist, and finally, to an Orthodox Jew who believed that the Jewish religion, culture, and its traditional domestic languages could not be meaningfully separated.

In this age of social clamor, individual Jews, who in many instances had just entered the modern world, could try on ideological guises at will. The results often produced strange and amazing outcomes that illustrate an essential theme of this book: there exists incredible fluidity in this thing called *Jewishness*, and the real plasticity of Judaism can be found in the face of both external and internal pressures. Here in the struggle between Zionism and Yiddishism was the challenge to redefine what a Jew is. The outcome for Zionism was the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. The only concrete result of Yiddishism and Goles Nationalism was the Jewish Autonomous Region, or Birobidzhan—which we will turn to now.

STALIN'S ZION: THE BIROBIDZHAN EXPERIMENT

The Soviet attempt to create for its Jews a homeland in the remote region of Birobidzhan is an exotic note in the history of Judaism. Yet, we must see it as one attempt, among many, of a scattered and stateless people to redefine what being Jewish meant in the face of rapid, modern change.

Russia is a vast country and the home of many peoples, stretching over eleven time zones from Eastern Europe to East Asia. The Imperial Russia of the Czars was home to a native population of Jews, and with territories annexed from the partition of Poland in 1815, it inherited a large number of Jews in areas like Galicia, which today comprises portions of Austria, Poland, and the Ukraine. This vast region, along with portions of western Russia, became part of a geographical region known as the Pale of Settlement, which between 1791 and 1917 was the only territory where Russian Jews could legally live.³⁰ For the most part, Jews were not allowed to travel outside the Pale without special permission, and the occupations in which they could engage were particularly restricted. The Pale was large, comprising most of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, the Ukraine, and parts of western Russia and was a late attempt by the Czars to deal with Russia's Jewish question, which had been unresolved by previous efforts, like mass conversion of the Jews to Russian Orthodoxy. So, over this extensive territory—at the time the home of more than five million Jews—the largest population of Jews in the world mostly lived in abject poverty, with little or no integration into wider Russian life. The Pale of Settlement was a formal failure since it concentrated and highlighted the Jews' intractable separateness. So many Jews in one area also left them prey to pogroms—which were not infrequent.³¹ Conditions were so poor in the Pale that when the doors of emigration opened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some two million of its Jews chose to leave, mostly bound for the United States. Most American Jews are descended from those Jews who had the good fortune to leave the Pale, which was sizable in landmass but meager in economic opportunities. But many had no choice but to stay, and the Czars continued their policies of ignoring the Jews or persecuting them, often in rapid succession.

However, the gross social and economic disparities in Russia were not only between Jew and gentile, but between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry. Russia retained a feudal system that lasted well into modern times. A Russian serf could often be bought or sold without rights—very much akin to African slaves in America.³² Even after this system was outlawed, the inequalities of Russian economic life continued. But as

Western currents of thought began to blow into old Imperial Russia, new strains of modern social and political philosophy began to be played.

The socialist movements, although formally outlawed in Russia, were particularly robust. Eventually, Yiddishist socialist organizations like the Bund became popular in Russia. In the hotbed of political activity both before and after the First World War, both gentile and Jewish socialist intellectuals believed that the “Jewish problem” in Russia could finally be solved by the formation of a socialist society. Some Yiddish intellectuals, like Chaim Zhitlovsky,³³ were deeply connected to this emerging sense of Yiddish socialism. And the wedding between socialistic thinking and the Yiddish language did not make strange bedfellows. As we saw, the vast majority of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish—and as they migrated to cities, leaving behind their village lives as peddlers, shopkeepers, and laborers for industrial jobs, they spoke Yiddish on the factory floors and in illegal union meetings. But the movement of socialist Yiddishism was far more than simply an attempt to translate European or Russian socialist ideas into the vernacular of the Jews of Russia. For many of its adherents, it was an attempt to replace traditional Rabbinical Jewish culture with a secular, Yiddish culture. It was an attempt to create a “new” Jew.

Indeed, socialist Yiddishism was a bold move: it attempted to place Jews in the center of the world picture, by encouraging them to partake in one of the most progressive movements of the day—a faction which sought to unite all workers in the world, regardless of their nationality or religion. Yet at the same time, this brand of Yiddishism sought to foster a distinctive Yiddish culture. As we shall see, this tightrope walk between the ideal of socialism’s universality and the national orientation of Yiddishism caused tragic results.

So the attempts by successive Czarist governments to russify and normalize the Jews ended in failure. In the decades before the Russian Revolution, millions of Russian Jews fled the country for the West, and those who remained lived in desperate poverty. A succession of pogroms in the 1880s only further highlighted the desperate plight of Russian Jews and gave rise to increased Zionist activity in Eastern Europe.

Part of the program to “normalize” Russian Jews involved connecting them to the soil through agricultural labor. The idea that a people could only be regularized through agricultural activity had deep roots in Russia.³⁴ Zionism became influenced by these ideas, and what eventually would become Labor Zionism preached a romantic connection with the soil of the Holy Land.³⁵ As we will see, this idea was found in Russian Communism as well, and the experiment of the JAR, conceived as a vast

agricultural colony, was designed by the Communist Party to wean the Soviet Jews away from capitalist, “parasitic” jobs.

However, after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the idea that Jews would receive their own piece of territory within the Soviet State seemed a remote option. Both Lenin and Stalin vehemently asserted that Jews were not a nation, but a religion. As such they were not entitled to the same rights and privileges as the other peoples in the multinational Soviet state. Lenin believed that the problem of Jewish persecution would be solved by the destruction of capitalism and the assimilation of the Jews into wider European culture. But after the revolution, those notions were abandoned by upper-level Communist Party officials for a more realistic approach. About a year after taking power, the Bolsheviks created a Jewish Section within the Communist Party, and a Commissariat for Jewish Affairs was set up within the Commissariat of Nationalities, which was headed by Stalin.³⁶ In the years to come, the Jewish Section of the Communist Party was instrumental in pushing for a Jewish homeland in the Soviet Union and advancing the use of Yiddish in education. In fact, the Soviet State became the first and only government to support Yiddish language institutions. With this mighty apparatus behind them, the members of the Jewish Affairs division of the Communist Party began a multipronged campaign to dismantle the institutions of religious Judaism, from its kosher food establishments to its synagogues, yeshivas, and Zionist organizations. The program of secular, Communist Yiddishism was allowed no official competition. The Hebrew language, as the tongue of “backward” religious Jews and “reactionary” bourgeois Zionists, was effectively outlawed in the Soviet Union.³⁷

The extreme, militant branch of Yiddishism prevailed in the Soviet Union. Yiddish language institutions like newspapers, journals, and theaters were established or subsidized by the Soviets, and Jewish trade unions, courts, and academic institutions were enjoined to use Yiddish. This Yiddish culture was very different from the kind created outside of the Soviet Union. For one, it was stripped of its marvelous variety. The Yiddishism of the Soviet state was guided by whatever overarching Soviet policy was in place at the moment. And the “Jewish” content taught in the Yiddish Soviet schools was nearly nonexistent. In many respects, it was a translation from Russian of the prevailing socialist party line into Yiddish.

One would think that Soviet Jews, long marginalized and oppressed, kept in the Pale of Settlement and subject to all manner of social and economic privations, would have embraced this opening up of their culture under the auspices of Yiddish. But there were intractable problems with

the Soviet push for Yiddish. For one, it was a top-down effort: There was little or no grass roots support for a secular Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. As the years after the revolution receded and life in the Soviet Union normalized, Yiddish was not the language of economic or social advancement. Russian, of course, was the language of political and economic power. Now that Jewish religious and cultural institutions of a non-Communist variety had been destroyed or weakened, young Jews had nowhere else to turn to better their lives than the mainstream of Soviet culture, and that culture's *lingua franca* was Russian. So the major social, political, and economic trends in Soviet culture were clearly away from Yiddish. Just as the sizable numbers of Yiddish speakers in the United States were tossing aside their language for English, similar forces were at work in the Soviet Union. The fact that so many factors were marshaled against it makes it all the more curious that the experiment of a Jewish homeland in Soviet Asia was tried at all.

AN UNLIKELY HOMELAND

The creation of a Jewish homeland in the Soviet Union was promoted by the unusual power of the Jewish Section of the Communist Party during the 1920s and 1930s. This, coupled with the Soviets' concern about the appalling poverty and unemployment of the Jews and a rise in anti-Semitism during the time, prompted the Soviets to try their hand at solving the "Jewish problem."³⁸ Just like the Zionists, the Jewish Section of the Communist Party tried to create a 'new' Jew, primarily by settling Jews on the land as agricultural laborers.

Part of the ambitious 1928 Five Year Plan was to settle one hundred thousand Jews into agricultural colonies. Most of these colonies were in western Russia, close to the population centers of Soviet Jews.³⁹ But there was great local resistance to the establishment of these colonies by gentiles in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. This, coupled with the increasingly urban makeup of Soviet Jews, led to the abandonment of these plans. But only a few years later, despite the fact that Soviet Jews were uninterested in being "regularized" by working the soil, and despite the dismal failure of agricultural colonies near the lands where Jews already lived, plans were once again drafted for a far more ambitious agricultural settlement.

In 1928 the Soviet government formally established a Jewish Autonomous Region near the Sino-Soviet border, in a region which became known as Birobidzhan, which is an amalgam of the names of the two chief

rivers in the area, and later became the name of the capital city.⁴⁰ The goal of creating this region was simple: it was the Communist alternative to Zionism and as such was a way to provide roots for a secular, Yiddish society grounded in socialism in order to solve the vexing problem of Jews in the Soviet state. Its establishment was also in keeping with Stalin's plans to settle European people in the eastern provinces in order to create buffer zones in Soviet East Asia against the rising powers of both China and Japan. Although Soviet Jews were increasingly urbanized, the colony was to be primarily agrarian: this again represented a revival of the age-old dream of "normalizing" Jews by connecting them to the land in order to wean them off their traditional "parasitic" occupations as moneylenders, vodka traders, and leaseholders. The Soviet government formed two bodies to organize the first settlement of Jews in agricultural colonies in the Ukraine and Belarus, and after 1928, in the JAR: they were called OZET, or the Society for the Settlement of the Jews on the Land, and KOMZET, or the Committee for the Settlement of Jewish Toilers of the Land.⁴¹

The region chosen for this venture was some 5,000 miles east of Moscow, and today it takes about five days to arrive there by the Trans-Siberian railroad. It is roughly the size of Belgium and in the late 1920s was sparsely populated by native Siberian peoples, Russian and Ukrainian migrants, Cossacks, and Koreans. It is extremely cold in the winter and very hot in the summer and a large portion of the territory is forested, with abundant swampland. There were few roads at the time, and before the founding of the JAR, the Trans-Siberian railroad had only recently penetrated the region.

When the Soviet government announced it was establishing the JAR in a 1928 decree, it realized that such a remote outpost of the Soviet Union with such little infrastructure would only attract very poor Jews. So the committees in charge of settling the JAR geared their incentives to these destitute Jews. Settlers were given money to travel to the JAR and were made promises of land that they could till as *de facto* owners. However, poor planning and little insight into the actual conditions of the JAR made the first years of settlement difficult. The first Jews who arrived found little food or fresh water and were forced to live in barracks near the Trans-Siberian railway station. As the little amount of money given to the migrants ran out, some were reduced to begging and prostitution. This, coupled with massive floods in 1928 and 1932, made the very early years after the settlement of the JAR particularly trying. The vast majority of first arrivals had no firsthand knowledge of farming. Of the some 6,200 Jews who arrived in the JAR in the first six months of 1932, most had

lived in larger towns and cities in Belarus and the Ukraine and worked as carpenters, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, woodworkers, and tailors.⁴²

So it was not surprising that in the first decade of its existence, the JAR had a nearly 50 percent Jewish dropout rate.⁴³ Yet the Soviet government continued to promote the JAR, offering lottery tickets to raise funds for the region. Through the 1930s, although conditions improved in the JAR, the area was still primitive. The city of Birobidzhan grew up along the tracks on the Trans-Siberian railroad, and by 1937 it had a population of some ten thousand, though it was without a sewage system or electrical lighting. The JAR had been created to support a population of agricultural Jews, and so a few collective farms were established. But industry moved into the JAR and by the eve of World War Two, the area had become semi-industrialized (as did other urban areas of the Soviet Far East between the wars) and grounded itself as a source of cement, tin, bricks, paper products, and clothing for the Soviet Union. Although the JAR was officially a Jewish region, with all the street signs in Yiddish and Russian, all government business conducted in Yiddish and Russian, with Yiddish a compulsory subject even in the non-Yiddish schools, the region remained overwhelmingly non-Jewish. In 1939 only 18,000 of the 109,000 people living in the JAR were Jewish. And of those Jews, a full 75 percent lived in towns and cities—mainly Birobidzhan.⁴⁴

Despite the formal failure of Jewish immigration into the JAR, the Soviet experiment brought fierce condemnation and equally strong support from the outside world. Of course, prominent Zionists opposed the JAR. They quite rightly questioned the Jewish cultural content of this Jewish Autonomous Region, where every shred of Jewish particularism was discarded in favor of the Stalinist party line. Supporters of the project were mainly found in the United States and Western Europe, where committees were formed to lend financial assistance to the JAR for the purchase of tools and farm equipment. Many prominent Yiddishists of the day, like Chaim Zhitlovsky, one of the founders of the Czernowitz Yiddish language conference, supported the JAR experiment and lavished praise on this Yiddish-speaking Zion.⁴⁵ A cadre of American-Jewish artists supported the JAR and commissioned artwork based on the project that toured a few cities to help bring the JAR to world attention.⁴⁶ Even a few Western Jews, mainly from Lithuania, Argentina, and the United States decided to settle in Birobidzhan.⁴⁷

So even though the JAR failed at bringing overwhelming numbers of Soviet Jews within its borders, it had great symbolic value both for Yiddish-speaking Soviet Jews and some of the Soviet leadership. Yiddish

was the official language of the JAR. Postage stamps and postmarks were issued in Yiddish, and the region was home to Yiddish-speaking policemen and judges. Sixteen Yiddish language schools existed in the JAR, including one teachers college. A Yiddish library was opened, and in 1934 a prominent Yiddish theater company opened in the JAR and toured all through the Soviet Union. A Yiddish language literary club sprang up. Two Yiddish novels were written with the JAR as their setting, and a Yiddish newspaper, the *Birobidzhaner shtern*, began to print—and continues to print to this day, making it one of the few Yiddish newspapers still in existence.⁴⁸ Of course, all of these projects were undertaken with government sponsorship and so had to take the current government line on every issue. But by and large the art and journalism produced in the JAR attempted to create a “new” Jew and in that way shared the same goal as contemporary Zionism. Just as many Jewish settlers in Palestine turned their backs on religious Judaism, the people and government of the JAR also suppressed religious expression of Judaism. And just as the Soviet government did all it could to weed out reactionary expressions of Judaism, it also prosecuted any anti-Semitic incidents that occurred in the JAR.⁴⁹

Although the JAR failed to attract huge numbers of Jewish settlers, its founding was a great symbolic victory. However, whatever the natural outcome of this experiment in Communist Judaism on the border of China may have been, the full course of its life was never allowed to take place. By the late 1930s, Stalin’s policies made an abrupt turn, and the leaders of the JAR, like many leaders in the Soviet Union, found themselves accused of following the policies of a previous era—policies that were suddenly outlawed.

THE FIRST TRIALS: STALIN’S ABOUT-FACE

From 1936 to 1938, Stalin began a series of purges in the Communist Party designed, at least in part, to rid himself of both real and perceived enemies. Part of Stalin’s motive was an overarching russification plan for the Soviet Union as his earlier promotion of ethnic diversity in the Soviet Union transformed into an increasing wariness of that diversity. He began to see in each ethnic group a potential fifth column and rebellious faction, so ethnicities that had long resided in the Soviet Union became suspect. For example, the Volga Germans were suspected supporters of the German state. And the same held true for Soviet Jews.⁵⁰ The Jews who had organized the JAR with Stalin’s blessing were suddenly accused of

being agents of international Zionism, capitalism, and counterrevolutionary activities. Prominent Birobidzhaner Jews were tried and convicted of anti-Soviet activity and sentenced to long terms in Siberian prisons. All Yiddish schools in the JAR were closed. The two organizations that had been created by the Communist Party to organize Jewish resettlement in the JAR were disbanded, and most of its leadership was arrested and sent to Siberia. Even the small Korean population of the JAR, numbering 4,500, was deported.⁵¹

But the JAR was never dismantled. It officially remained the Jewish Autonomous Region, even as its leadership was viciously eradicated. With the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland in 1939, it appeared that Stalin even entertained the idea of using the JAR as an area to resettle the large Jewish population he had inherited from the dismantled Polish state. But the beginning of World War Two thwarted his efforts. In fact, as World War Two began, it became apparent that Stalin had merely wanted to use the JAR as a place where Soviet Jews could be assimilated to Soviet socialism.

THE FIRST REBIRTH

So the founding and continued existence of the JAR was an act that would be filled with irony: there still remains a Jewish Autonomous Region in the Soviet Far East which is nearly empty of Jews. Even though the official language was Yiddish, such a bureaucratic act alone could not mold a Yiddish state. The Yiddish used for journalism and state purposes became a source of ridicule in the Yiddish-speaking world. Whenever possible in official contexts, the Hebrew content of Soviet Yiddish was removed, and this, coupled with the translations of Marxist-Leninist terms and phrases, made for an odd and often artificial language that was easy to lampoon and deride.⁵²

But even without the pressure of Stalin's purges and sudden changes in policy, Yiddish speakers would have a difficult future in the Soviet Union. Even after the policy of a plurality of ethnicities and languages became the norm in the Soviet Union, the language of prestige and advancement was Russian. Soviet Jews quickly learned that language and left Yiddish behind. Also, the JAR was a remote place, far away from the centers of Soviet intellectual, economic, and political life. Few Jews wanted to settle there, and many who did were disappointed by primitive conditions in the JAR and left for more affluent cities in the Soviet Far East. For all its difficulties, life in the Soviet Union had given Jews certain freedoms they

did not have in Czarist Russia. There was no longer a Pale of Settlement, and cities with jobs and educational opportunities were open to them. So why settle in muddy, remote Birobidzhan when there were more attractive locations to live and work?

Still, the JAR refused to die quietly. During the Second World War, the region suffered from the same privations as the rest of the Soviet Union, and after the war, witnessed a relaxation of impositions also like the rest of the country. The Soviet government endorsed a revival of the JAR immediately following the war. The President of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Kalinin, even called the JAR a Jewish national state.⁵³ The Soviet government once more offered incentives for Jews to settle the region, and by 1948, some thirty thousand Jews had moved into the JAR, many of them displaced from the Holocaust or from war-ravaged areas of western Russia. Yiddish schools were reopened, but enrollment in them remained low. There was a general relaxation of antireligious laws in the Soviet Union right after the war, so the JAR saw its first legally constructed synagogue. And as in the 1930s, international aid began to flow into the JAR, mainly from an organization known as AMBIJAN (Americans for Birobidzhan) whose honorary president was Albert Einstein.⁵⁴

But regardless of official sanction and external aide, the JAR, like much of the Soviet Union, was in shambles from years of war. Skilled labor was in short supply, and like the early days of settlement in the region, officials in the JAR were not ready for the new immigrants and placed them in poorly built houses that quickly became dangerous slums. As many as nine thousand of the fourteen thousand Jews who arrived in 1946 eventually moved elsewhere.⁵⁵ And then, Stalin's policy toward the JAR changed once again.

The establishment of the State of Israel was declared in 1948. At first, Stalin supported the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine, and the Soviet Union voted in its favor at the United Nations in 1947. But Stalin, not surprisingly, changed his mind about Zionism and in answer to the founding of the State of Israel, set about to destroy all prominent Jewish intellectuals in the Soviet Union. This purge culminated in the famous Doctors' Plot in 1953, in which several Jewish physicians were falsely arrested and tried for conspiring to poison and kill the top Soviet leadership.⁵⁶ The leaders in the JAR suffered during this time of renewed persecution, and many were tried and sentenced for the ironic charge of fostering Jewish culture in a region mostly inhabited by non-Jews. Yiddish schools were closed once again, and in 1956 a suspicious fire burned down the Birobidzhan synagogue, destroying its library of thirty thousand books. Following this round of persecution, the JAR never fully recovered.⁵⁷

A FAILED ZION

The census numbers of the years subsequent to the 1950s tell the sad tale of the JAR's long demise. In 1959, only 9 percent of the population, or 14,269 of 162,856, identified themselves as Jewish.⁵⁸ In 1970, the number was at 11,452.⁵⁹ In 1989, during the reforms initiated during *glasnost*, the JAR enjoyed a modest formal revival as Yiddish schools were opened, including a teachers college. But in the 1989 census, 9,000 of the 214,000 people living in the JAR identified themselves as Jewish.⁶⁰ Despite these moribund figures, the area continued to be called the Jewish Autonomous Region. But the bleeding of the population did not end there. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, most Soviet Jews left the former Soviet Union for the United States and Israel. At the turn of the twentieth century, Russia had the largest Jewish population in the world. By the close of that century, most of its Jews had emigrated, including those who had lived in the JAR.⁶¹

Still, the JAR continued to exist politically as a Jewish national entity. The territory, called an *oblast* in Russian, which means "region" or "zone," is still officially an autonomous Jewish region, with Yiddish as an official language. Like many regions of Russia, it has seen a reemergence of religious and ethnic identity since the fall of Communism. A new synagogue was opened in Birobidzhan, and radio and TV began to broadcast Jewish cultural events. In general, the JAR turned an official eye toward its Jewish heritage. Even today, now that the region is largely empty of Jews, the JAR continues to advertise its Jewish identity. In the proliferation of regions and states in Russia's vast federation, being a Jewish region separates it from the herd and brings the area special attention from the West. But the JAR continues to be haunted by the same vexing questions: just what sort of Jewish entity is the JAR? With only a small number of Jews in residence, how can this political entity call itself a homeland for Jews? In a sense, these questions have plagued the experiment in the JAR since its outset, when hope of its success was rife and the territory was more patently "Jewish" than it is now.⁶²

The JAR was the only formal attempt to put into place the dream of a Yiddish state. As we saw earlier, Goles Nationalism, in its various forms, conceived of the kind of state the JAR attempted. The JAR was a semi-autonomous region within a wider confederation of states, which gave preference to Jews and fostered Yiddish as the language spoken by the vast majority of Soviet Jews. Yet in many ways the JAR was a failure. In almost every sense, Stalin's wavering policy on linguistic and ethnic minorities was certainly the most prominent cause of its weakness. Whatever

the difficulties of establishing this Yiddish “state” on the border of China, Stalin’s own explosive mutability doomed the JAR to failure. The JAR, both Yiddish and agricultural, also ran against the grain of the interwar Soviet Union. The country was becoming increasingly russified, urban, and industrialized. Jews, like many other ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union, were not moving toward but away from the ranks of peasantry. Another factor in the region’s failure was that the Jews of the Soviet Union had no religious, ethnic, or even sentimental attachment to the JAR, which was a piece of land with no historical connection to the Jews, and which was well outside the orbit of traditional lands of the Jewish Diaspora—which was a key component in the Goles Nationalist dream. If Birobidzhan was no Land of Israel, neither was it even Polish Galicia.

We will never know if the Yiddishist dream could have become a reality, either in the JAR or elsewhere, for the Holocaust destroyed nearly all of the Yiddish-speaking communities that fostered the hope of Goles Nationalism. The communities that remained, in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Israel, succumbed to linguistic and ethnic assimilation, bringing the Yiddish language as a widespread and living entity in the life of Jews to all but a close.⁶³

Certainly, Goles Nationalism and the JAR were not ventures that were destined for failure. As the most contemporary example of another Zion, the JAR gives us a glimpse of a modern manifestation of Judaism’s ability to transform itself. Rather than a static entity, Judaism possesses a marvelous mutability, adapting itself to changing circumstances.

Perhaps the blame for the failure of the Yiddishist agenda rests with its singular devotion to language. Prominent Yiddishists viewed Yiddish as the end to all ethnic and national questions. A common language, although key to forming an overarching sense of national purpose, cannot be the sole element of national identity. Also, the Yiddishists, as compared to the Zionists, were poor organizers. With only few interruptions, the Zionists’ Congresses that started in Basel in 1897 continued and became the precursors to the Israeli parliament, or the Knesset.⁶⁴ In contrast, the Czernowitz Yiddish language conference was never repeated. The Yiddishists were too fractured and contentious to present a solid and sustained front. And they had no leader like Herzl to rally behind. Still, Goles Nationalism and the JAR were not allowed to fail on their own merits. The great powers of the day destroyed them, as they destroyed so much of twentieth-century Europe. Israel and the United States became the homeland of most European Jews. But the state’s longevity cannot be the sole judge of its viability—since all states, even the most powerful and vibrant—eventually die. Just as was the case with

the other six examples of other Zions in this work, it becomes impossible not to ask the question: what if? What if the JAR and its dream of a Yiddish-speaking state had been more successful? Perhaps today there would have been *another* Jewish state where the dominant language was Yiddish, offering *another* Jewish national culture in addition to the State of Israel. Both states, for all their differences, would have shared many similarities, and may have been fruitful partners in molding modern Jewish identity. If a million Yiddish speakers had settled in the JAR, the net effect would have been extraordinary. The flowering of Yiddish culture, which for all purposes came to a close with the end of the Second World War, could have moved forward, preserving its rich past and adding to the patrimony of the future. A vibrant Yiddish language culture, in a state which had local control of its institutions and economy, could have been a counterbalancing vision for the Jewish State of Israel, acting as a partner and at times a critic, and offering a competing version of Jewish national life that could very well have benefited the State of Israel, the JAR, and the wider world.

THE DEATH OF A DREAM

Shortly after Goles Nationalism failed, an entire language group died along with it. The destruction of the Yiddish-speaking strongholds in Eastern Europe during the Second World War signaled the end of Zionism's main Jewish political opponent and the final and only other attempt to form another Zion in the twentieth century. The remaining Yiddish speakers of Europe emigrated to Israel, the United States, and South America, and through time most succumbed to linguistic assimilation. Yiddish, once a thriving language even outside of Eastern Europe in cities as far west as New York, began to lose speakers with each postwar year. New York City once had many Yiddish newspapers. Today, only one remains—the *Forverts*, or “Forward,” which, after a long history as a daily newspaper, is now a weekly magazine.⁶⁵ Newspapers cannot survive without readers, and the loss of Yiddish newspapers was a clear indication of the lack of health and vitality of Yiddish. Today, Yiddish is mainly spoken by the sizable population of Orthodox and Chasidic Jews, mainly in Israel and New York City.⁶⁶ For them it remains the language of religious instruction and daily communication, yet with significant incursions of Hebrew into Israeli Yiddish and English into New York Yiddish. Certainly the robust Yiddish that created Goles Nationalism and the JAR is no longer anywhere to be found.

NINE

WHO IS A JEW? ZION AND IDENTITY

ANOTHER KIND OF JEW

In these seven examples of “other Zions,” we have seen an astonishing political, social, religious, and geographical range. In all the examples explored, Jews took a role in guiding their political destiny—something that had not occurred in the Land of Israel since the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 132–135 CE and would not again occur there until the founding of modern Israel in 1948. All these other efforts at Jewish political independence occurred outside Israel, which is the traditional land of Jewish political autonomy. The mythical Lost Tribes of northern Israel provided an early template for Jewish independence outside Zion and can be taken together with the seven examples here to provide ample evidence that Jews have not necessarily needed the Land of Israel to exercise political self-determination. The possibility of Jewish independence outside Israel conflicts with the very common assumption that Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE—and very certainly after the brutal crushing of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 CE—lost all “political” impulses.

One Roman author estimated that half a million Jews were killed during the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and most of the Jewish towns of Judea were razed to the ground.¹ The Rabbinical authorities who supported the rebellion, including the famous Rabbi Akiva, were executed. The Emperor Hadrian attempted to root out the Jewish religion by outlawing Jewish practices, prohibiting the use of the Jewish calendar, and executing Jewish scholars. He even had a Torah scroll symbolically burned on the ruins of the Temple and banned Jews from living in or entering Jerusalem, and to erase the Jewish stamp on the land, he renamed the city *Aelia Capitolina*, and Judea *Syria Palaestina*.²

As one would predict, Judaism after the revolt became politically conservative, and messianic notions were increasingly abstract and spiritualized.³

The Talmud sometimes referred to Bar Kokhba as Ben Kosiba, which is a derogatory name implying that Bar Kokhba is a false Messiah.⁴ Jewish communities increasingly modeled themselves according to the growing influence of the “rabbis” or “teachers.” Their form of Judaism—which is still the dominant one today—relied on a system of education, a deep connection with sacred texts, a high level of literacy, and the observance of a series of prohibitions and commandments, which during the years following the loss of political independence in Judea became increasingly codified. With the exception of a few groups (such as the Samaritans and Karaites) who did not obey Rabbinical precedent, most Jews in the world were and are loyal to this tradition.⁵

The Rabbinical tradition has frequently been viewed as largely apolitical.⁶ Certainly Rabbinical scholars and authorities have studied the laws relating to the monarchy in Israel and Temple in Jerusalem, in agreement that if the Messiah comes, knowledge of these laws would become relevant. But overall, messianic ideas have been considered distant notions compared to present realities,⁷ and Jewish scholars in the Rabbinical tradition have studied these laws without any pressing expectation of putting them into practice. The dominant tradition holds that Rabbinical Jewish societies were never chiefly concerned with economic production, military defense, or foreign policy,⁸ and that Jewish groups from the destruction of the Temple to the modern era were segregated (or segregated themselves) from their gentile neighbors, which served to preserve their identity. They had a national sense, but as a rule, it was not vigorously or practically pursued. In fact, Rabbinical Judaism eschewed political power and worked with the gentile government in any given community whenever possible to ensure the safety of Jews.⁹

This perception of Rabbinical Judaism remained dominant with scholars and became the guiding view of Zionism and later of many Israelis. The tradition was that religious Judaism, as opposed to the secular, ethnic, and linguistic Judaism of the State of Israel, was wholly lacking a political and military impulse, and that only Zionism—a new force in Jewish life, wherein Jews governed themselves socially, politically, and most importantly of all, militarily—provided Jews with real autonomy.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the perception of a previously politically passive Judaism was further confirmed for Israelis. Early Israeli writers and politicians often expressed a curious contempt for the six million European Jews who perished in World War Two. They were often seen as victims who in some sense deserved their fate since they represented a weak, Diaspora Judaism. For many early Israelis, the Holocaust was yet another indication of the sickness of Diaspora Judaism and the Rabbinical tradition.¹⁰

These views wholly fail to take into account the instances when Jews have governed themselves outside the boundaries of the Land of Israel. In the examples explored here, we have seen the marvelous diversity of Jews who in many instances have taken a political role in the world. These counterinstances to the academic and Zionist views of Judaism provide important examples of the vision of Judaism as a whole. Rather than existing as something completely conservative and fixed, the tradition had sufficient malleability to allow occasional Jewish political and military independence outside of the Land of Israel within a span of nearly two thousand years.

Part of the historical perceptions of these other Zions can be traced back to the enduring mystery of the Lost Tribes of Israel. The historical memory of the Northern Tribes of Israel—some of whom were carried into exile by the Assyrian armies—and also the mythological embellishment of their survival, their prosperity, and their strength provided fertile ground for speculation about other Zions. Since Christianity and Judaism share some of the same sacred writings, imaginings about the Lost Tribes became a Christian preoccupation, especially associated with the immensely popular tales that circulated throughout Europe about Prester John's Kingdom. Popularized in letters, Prester John's Christian Kingdom was supposedly keeping the powerful Lost Tribes at bay, preventing a calamity from befalling both Christendom and the lands of Islam.

As Jewish merchants began to travel the world during the Middle Ages, they looked for evidence of the Lost Tribes wherever they went. They seemed to find these groups, or hear stories about them, all over the medieval map. The Lost Tribes were sought and found from Africa to today's India (where Prester John's Kingdom was thought to be) and beyond. Certain Jewish travelers who were coming to Europe and North Africa from distant lands, like Eldad ha-Dani, claimed to be members of the Lost Tribes. Rumors of independent or semi-independent Jewish tribes in Ethiopia began to reach the West by the 1400s, further shaping rumors of the Lost Tribes.

During the Middle Ages, while speculation about the Lost Tribes assumed a place in both Jewish and Christian messianic expectations, real knowledge of independent Jews in Ethiopia also began to flow to the north. And a close look at the Ethiopian Jews reveals a fascinating and complex picture. For generations, scholars attempted to place this Jewish group alongside others in the history of Diaspora communities. One theory held that they were descended from an ancient garrison of Jewish warriors stationed on the island of Elephantine on the Nile. Another held that they were descendants of Jewish immigrants from Yemen or converts

from that original community. But both theories were wholly without proof. The Ethiopian Jews referred to themselves as Beta Israel, or the House of Israel, while the surrounding gentile Ethiopians called them *falasha*, a term that was long translated as “immigrant.”

More recent work on this group suggests that there is good reason to believe that the Beta Israel “became” Jews through long processes of estrangement from the native Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Over the course of at least two centuries, a process of polarization had taken place within Ethiopian society between groups who wished the Church to keep its longstanding “Judaic” customs and those who wished to align with the practices of the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church traditions. As the power of the Ethiopian king and his army became increasingly associated with the Church, rebel groups began to migrate to communities of mysterious “ayhud,” or Jews, who dwelled in the interior highlands. They lived as independent political units away from the structures of imperial power. In the continual struggles between local lords and the king in medieval Ethiopia, being a “Jew” carried connotations of independence, martial fierceness, and rebellion.

A series of wars occurred from the late 1400s to the early 1600s between the Ethiopian kings and the *ayhud*—later to become Beta Israel groups, some of whom were under the rule of Jewish royal families who elected a prince or princes to lead them into battle. To the outside world, these wars were fuel for speculation about the Lost Tribes in Ethiopia. Battles between a Christian king and Jewish princes were reminiscent of the stories told in the letters of Prester John.

Eventually, the Ethiopian kings won dominance, and imperial control was exerted over the traditional lands of the Beta Israel. They were displaced from their lands and given the pejorative term *falasha*, which can be translated as “landless peasant.” The Beta Israel then began to solidify their traditions and writings in order to differentiate themselves from the Ethiopian Church. They no longer relied on war for independence as they increasingly kept themselves separate from their Christian neighbors through ritual taboos. The Beta Israel became a class and worked in the arts and crafts. And in the aftermath of their military defeat, they also became a valuable source of troops for the Ethiopian Imperial army.

The Ethiopian context of the Beta Israel sheds important light on Ethiopian self-conceptions: for Ethiopian Christians and “Jews” alike, Ethiopia is the New Zion. One tradition places the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia, and the legendary accounts of both the Axumite royal house and the Beta Israel were traced to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. For the Beta Israel, for whom Ethiopia was Zion, the struggle for political freedom

and the military conflicts with enemies were couched in a messianic framework. We see in the story of the Beta Israel a tale of transformation through the decades and centuries, in which answers to the questions “Who is a Jew?” and “What is a Jewish state?” have an astonishing malleability.¹¹

During Muslim rule in Spain, some Jews enjoyed a fabulous burst of freedom and even enjoyed political power. Hasdai ibn Shaprut was the prime minister to the Caliph of al-Andalus and corresponded with Jews the world over. It was during these diplomatic duties that he discovered beyond Byzantium the existence of a state ruled by a Jewish king. Hasdai wrote a letter to the king of the Khazars, as these people were known, and received a reply. The conversion of the Khazar kings and nobles to Judaism was a fascinating chapter in medieval Judaism. The Khazars, as a Turkic people occupying the Caucasus region of Russia, had wandered into Europe and the Middle East from Central Asia, and like many Turkic nomads, they adopted and adapted the customs of the peoples they conquered or settled alongside. But rather than adopt Christianity or Islam, the Khazars chose Judaism. They may have done so to maintain their independence, as sandwiched between the Christian Byzantine Greeks to the west and the Muslim Caliphate to the south, their conversion to Judaism became one way to maintain political neutrality.

The conversion of the Khazars to Judaism became a legend among medieval Jews, and the event was set down forever in Judah HaLevi’s work, *The Kuzari*. The disputation between a Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and pagan scholar for the soul of the Khazar king was a literary leitmotif for the true configuration of the Khazar Kingdom, which was populated by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and pagans. Arab writers and chroniclers related that the Khazar Kingdom was full of a variety of people, and they also claimed that the Khazar king was ritually killed—a detail not revealed in any “Jewish” source about Khazaria.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, additional documentary evidence surfaced about the Khazars. The Schechter Letter from the Cairo Geniza told yet another version of the Khazar conversion to Judaism—one that mirrored but did not duplicate the account given in King Joseph’s Reply. In both accounts, the Khazar kings converted to Judaism in stages. At first, they appeared to have adopted some Jewish practices, perhaps even customs like animal sacrifice, which were not found within the orbit of Rabbinical Judaism. Later, Rabbinical Judaism was fully embraced.

Finally, the Kievan Letter, discovered in the 1960s, provided yet another version of Jewish Khazaria. In this letter, rank-and-file Khazarian

Jews communicate with their coreligionists abroad, suggesting that the Khazar community of Jews was more integrated into the Judaism of the time than previously thought. The letter itself bears evidence that distinctly Khazarian elements remained even at the late date of the letter's writing. Turkic names and titles are written in the letter, as well as an entire Turkic sentence at the bottom of the letter.

So what kind of other Zion was Khazaria? Did the Khazar kings harbor any ambitions to conquer the Holy Land? There is no indication that they did. They were occupied by maintaining their independence in the face of Christian and Muslim pressure, and toward the end of Khazaria's history, checking Russ expansion from the north. Did a Khazar king ever dream of ruling a pan-Jewish kingdom stretching from the Black Sea to Jerusalem? It proves difficult to believe that a Jewish king in the Khazars' position would not have dreamed of such a thing. The Jews of Khazaria were Rabbinical Jews, but they were not squeamish about exercising their power. Quite the contrary, they relished it, and men like Hasdai ibn Shaprut, long accustomed to dealing with those in power, put great hopes in the Khazar Jewish kings, whom he at first mistakenly believed to be members of the powerful Lost Tribes of Israel.¹²

In the years before the rise of Islam in Arabia, Jews also enjoyed political autonomy there, in two regions. To the north, they lived in the Hijaz near Mecca and Medina and other oasis towns, and in the very far south, they lived in Yemen, or Himyar. Arabia, always a physically desolate place, was an area where marginal groups who were persecuted elsewhere could find sanctuary. So from very early times, Arabia was a haven for Jews. Jews had an early influence over Himyar, and by the late 300s the inhabitants began to write inscriptions of a monotheistic nature. In the next two hundred years, this expression of monotheism became Judaism under the Himyarite kings and ended with the reign of Dhu Nuwas. This openly Jewish king waged war with Christian Ethiopia to secure the political freedom of his land. A kind of Crusade was mounted against him: Byzantium provided the ships and Ethiopia the troops, and Dhu Nuwas and his Jewish kingdom were destroyed.

The Himyarite Jewish monarchy moved in stages remarkably similar to the Beta Israel and Khazar kings in their steps toward Judaism. From an early commitment to a form of Jewish monotheism, the Himyarites increasingly came under the orbit of a more organized Judaism. There are some indications that Dhu Nuwas had messianic hopes: he wanted to conquer all of Arabia and wrest Palestine from the Greeks, to form a pan-Jewish kingdom from Jerusalem to the coasts of southern Arabia.

About two hundred years after Himyar's kings embraced Judaism, Jewish tribes living in northern Arabia enjoyed an independent existence. Tribalism as anything more than a religious formality had long disappeared in most Jewish communities, but the Jews of the Hijaz, in imitation of their pagan Arab neighbors, formed tribes in both towns and the countryside. Jewish tribes made alliances among themselves and with pagan Arab tribes for mutual defense and trade. They enjoyed nearly full sovereignty regarding every level of their communal existence, including militarily. In the constant tension between the residents of settled towns and oasis communities and the wandering Bedouin, Jews built significant fortifications to protect their lands and communities. With the rise of Islam and its Prophet Mohammad, the powerful Jews of the Hijaz became a significant impediment to Mohammad's religious and military expansion. Depending on his position at any given moment, Mohammad at times placated or waged wars against the Jews of the Hijaz. Ultimately, Mohammad took advantage of their politically fractured circumstances to defeat them in battle and subjugate them, but the powerful memory of independent Jews in Arabia refused to die. Until modern times, persistent rumors abounded that independent Bedouin Jews lived in the interior of Arabia. This idea of a warlike, untamed people may have been nothing more than a historical afterimage of a memory and fear from long ago.

However, the presence of independent Jews in Arabia, whether real or imagined, no doubt kindled the imaginations of Jews in the Middle East. Arabia is physically connected to the Holy Land, and the same magnetic, messianic pull that Dhu Nuwas felt during his campaigns in southern Arabia also existed in the north. In the heady days before the rise of Islam in Arabia, monotheistic trends in pagan Arab society were well attested. Without Mohammad—or if Mohammad's message had not proven so powerfully attractive to pagan Arabs—perhaps a pan-Jewish kingdom would have been the net result of the religious and political dynamism of the early Arabs and their contact with the Jews of the Hijaz.¹³

About five hundred years earlier, at the turn of the first century of the Common Era, in the sprawling Parthian Empire, certain Jews were able to take advantage of the dynamic politics of Parthia to carve out independent states for themselves. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of two Jewish brothers who staged a *coup*, overthrew a local Parthian lord, and took control of his lands. The king of Parthia had two choices: to accept the rule of the Jewish brothers or to quash their rebellion. The king, distracted by more pressing problems, chose to legitimize their rule. So Parthia and the world saw something unique: an independent

state run by Jews within the larger confederation of states of the Parthian Empire.

For Josephus, the story of the Jewish brothers Anilaeus and Asinaeus was but a prelude to a longer and more interesting tale about the Jewish political sovereignty of the house of Monobazus of Adiabene. Josephus may have written the story with the guide of an older source, possibly a royal chronicle from Adiabene. The tale relates how Monobazus marries his sister Helena, and how their son Izates is early singled out for divine favor. Josephus explains the turns Izates undertakes on his quest to become a Jew. At first he practices some Jewish customs but does not formally convert. Only when confronted by a Jew traveling through Adiabene does he fully convert to the faith by undergoing circumcision. In a parallel story, his mother, Queen Helena, is converted to Judaism. After Izates fully converts, Queen Helena makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Josephus writes of Izates's struggle to maintain power following his conversion as he continually seeks God's aid. Izates and Helena, through the example of their own superior virtue, convince Izates's brother Monobazus to convert to Judaism along with several members of the Adiabene nobility. When Izates and his mother Helena die, the throne goes to his older brother Monobazus.

Tales of the Jewish house of Monobazus were related in the Rabbinical literature as well. Here, the stories were often of an apolitical nature and stressed the superior religious piety of the members of the royal house of Adiabene. The conversion of the royals of Adiabene to Judaism was a sufficiently strong historical memory to have been preserved by both Josephus and in some Rabbinical writings—no doubt reflecting a historical truth beneath the layers of remembrance, embellishment, and myth. Like most royal conversions to a “foreign” religion, the move of the House of Adiabene to Judaism may have had a practical element. In the welter of Parthian politics, alliances against the king could often prove politically useful. The monarchs of Adiabene possibly sought to form a larger empire by uniting the fractured Jewish population of Parthia with that of Palestine. The brutal suppression of the Jewish revolt in 73 CE put an end to those ambitions, but not before a potent memory of this unique Jewish royal family was left in Jewish literature.

The Jewish House of Monobazus lasted in Adiabene about forty years. This other Zion would have been an even more interesting political entity if it had survived and its ambitions had succeeded. The state would have united the two great population centers of Jews in antiquity—those in Judea and Babylonia—and we can only imagine that the union would have been a source of astonishing vitality.¹⁴

The problem of Jewish identity has plagued most of our examples of other Zions, but none more so than the case of the Kahina, the Berber queen who successfully staved off the Muslim invasion of North Africa in the seventh century. Like the Berbers before the advent of Islam, her religious and cultural identity was not fixed in the historical record. Already bound up in myth and legend when her story was written down, her tale was embellished through the centuries, until finally one Muslim historian claimed she was a Jew, as many of the Berbers of North Africa may have been before the coming of Islam. In a wider context, and well into modern times, rumors of "Jewish" tribes in Berber Africa—and as Islam spread through North Africa, also in the southern lands not controlled by Muslim polities—was a potent myth in North Africa. Once more, the memory of Jewish military power, long eclipsed by Islam and its attempts to control Jewish national aspirations, found an alternate form of life.¹⁵

Our final example of another Zion is the most contemporary and also the best documented. The JAR, or the Jewish Autonomous Region, in Soviet Asia, was the only real competitor to the new Zionist brand of Jewish nationalism that evolved during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The JAR was partially born from the movement known as Yiddishism—which promoted the Yiddish language in education, the arts, politics, and journalism for the nearly eleven million Yiddish speakers and readers in pre-Holocaust Europe—and from Diaspora or Goles Nationalism, which was an attempt to push a Yiddishist agenda onto the stage of world politics. In the time before the First World War, linguistic and ethnic minorities in Europe were clamoring for their rights within the large, multiethnic states of Central and Eastern Europe. Goles Nationalism became a part of this trend, and the Yiddishist agenda was fought on many fronts. As we saw, men like Nathan Birnbaum ran for office in Austrian elections and pressed for formal recognition of Yiddish speakers in the Austrian parliament. Increasingly, as the political doors began to close (even as they had never been fully opened), the Yiddishists focused on cultural issues. And the Yiddishists molded Yiddish into a modern tongue, which gave it a prestige it had never previously enjoyed.

But it was in the Soviet Union where the Diaspora Nationalists' dream came to fruition. In the 1920s, influential Jewish members of the Communist Party pushed for the creation of a Jewish homeland in the Soviet Union. The settlement of Birobidzhan with Soviet Jews was meant, in part, to solve the "Jewish problem" in the Soviet Union. The Jews had long been oppressed under Czarist rule and fared only slightly better under the Communists. Religious Judaism was continually under assault by the atheistic Communist Party, and the Soviet government closed down synagogues,

religious schools, and kosher butcher shops. The attempt to create a secular Yiddish socialist culture was meant to form a new, modern Jewish identity and was also an effort to offer an alternate Zion to the one under construction by Jews in Palestine. The JAR was meant to “normalize” Jews, to settle them on the land, and to engage them in agricultural labor, which was an activity that both the Zionists and Communists believed would rehabilitate the Jews and make them more “useful” members of society.

Located in a remote area on the Soviet border with Manchuria, the JAR was a bold venture. But unlike the equally remote outpost of Ottoman Turkish Palestine, and later British Mandate Palestine, the JAR did not offer a religious, intellectual, or sentimental attachment for Soviet Jews. It attracted only the most destitute of Jews, and this, coupled with the poor planning of the settlement in the early years, made the JAR a hard sell. Finally, Stalin’s shifting and maniacal policies regarding ethnic minorities, and his significant anti-Semitism, prevented the JAR from flowering.

Birobidzhan remains in the JAR today, though few Jews live there. The JAR shares with the State of Israel the right to call itself one of two officially sanctioned political entities created in the modern era as political and cultural homelands for Jews. As another Zion, the JAR remains a reality.¹⁶

MIHU YEHUDI: WHO IS A JEW?

Who is a Jew? This question has repeatedly surfaced because most of the kingdoms, nations, and tribes examined in this work were the results of conversion to Judaism. Certainly, the cases of the Khazars, the House of Monobazus in Adiabene, the Jewish kings in ancient Yemen, the Kahina, and even the Beta Israel in Ethiopia involved some form of gentile conversion to Judaism.

At first thought, the question does not seem complex. But as we will see, who is considered a Jew has a great deal to do with who is answering the question. And for our examples of other Zions, those answers become keys to unraveling the variety of Jewish experience and identity.

In the modern world, and certainly since the founding of the State of Israel, this difficult issue has gained several layers of complexity. Before the rise of different “denominations” in modern Judaism (roughly, the Haredi or Chasidim, the Modern Orthodox, the Conservative movement, Reform Judaism, and Reconstructionist Judaism),¹⁷ the criteria for who was considered a Jew was formally simple: a Jew was a man or a woman born of a Jewish mother or a man or a woman who was converted by undergoing the rite of conversion to Judaism. In its simplest form, conver-

sion involved circumcision for men and immersion in a *mikveh*, or ritual bath, for women. According to the traditional definition, even a Jew who no longer practiced the religion, and who actively sinned, was legally considered a Jew.¹⁸

After the sudden secularization of Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when religious criteria were no longer completely applicable as markers of Jewish identity, the situation became far more complex. For more liberal denominations of Jews, such as Reform or Reconstructionist groups, Jewish identity shifted. In the United States, where intermarriage rates have exceeded 50 percent, mixed marriages between Jews and gentiles are common. Most modern Reform groups accept as Jewish any person with one Jewish parent (whether male or female) who declares him or herself Jewish.¹⁹ For Reform and Reconstructionist groups, the rites of conversion are usually less stringent than those of Orthodox congregations. The result in the West is a disagreement over who is a Jew. More Orthodox congregations do not accept the legitimacy of conversions into liberal congregations, nor do they accept those groups' definitions of who is a Jew. Consequently, they will often fail to recognize members of liberal congregations as Jews.

With the founding of the State of Israel, the situation became even more complex. The Law of Return allows any Jew to settle in Israel.²⁰ The State of Israel significantly differs from *halaka*, or ritual Jewish law, on defining who is a Jew. The Law of Return allows anyone who has one Jewish grandparent to settle in Israel and become an Israeli citizen. The symbolism of the one Jewish grandparent as a qualification for admission into the State of Israel is potent: it was the criterion of Jewishness used by the Nazis in the Nuremberg Laws.²¹ However, this criterion does not grant that person "Jewish" status in Israel. Here is the vital difference between an Israeli—a citizen in a modern, secular state—and a Jew, which is a religious identification.²² In the last twenty years, about three hundred thousand non-Jews, mostly from the former Soviet Union, have gained entry into Israel on the basis of having one Jewish grandparent or being married to a Jew.²³ Many of these people will never be formally converted to Judaism.

Israeli laws governing marriage and divorce act as a bulwark against certain Israelis fully entering into Jewish life. Marriages and divorces in the State of Israel are handled by Rabbinical authorities under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior. Generally, the Rabbinical authorities must approve or disapprove of the Jewish status of an individual Israeli seeking marriage or divorce. The reason this function was placed under religious authority is simple: in Judaism, valid marriage and divorce are

crucial to defining who is and who is not a Jew. In most cases, unless a marriage is between two Jews who are recognized as such by respected Rabbinical authorities, the union is questionable and any offspring can be considered *mamzerim*. This Hebrew word, usually inadequately defined as “bastard,” does not necessarily imply that the child is born out of wedlock. It usually means that the child is not considered a full-fledged Jew in terms of marriage and divorce. A *mamzer*, or the child of a *mamzer*, is a Jew—but he or she can only marry another *mamzer*, a convert to Judaism, or a Jewish slave. In effect, such marriages create a subset of Jews who are Jews for all purposes except those of marriage and divorce. Divorce comes into play here since only rabbinically sanctioned, legally valid divorces permit a Jew to remarry. If a Jew divorces under circumstances that are not permitted, any children which result from a new union could be declared *mamzers*. The State of Israel takes these distinctions seriously, keeps a list of *mamzerim*, and does not allow them to marry anyone who is not either a convert to Judaism or a fellow *mamzer*.²⁴

The rules of marriage and divorce allow the State of Israel to keep *de facto* control over the definition of a Jew. By allowing marriage and divorce laws to follow a religious definition of who is a Jew, the secular Israeli state compromised with religious authorities in order to prevent a crisis in the Jewish world by creating two definitions of who is a Jew: one secular and declared by Israeli law and the other religious.²⁵ However, using the Rabbinical model of valid marriage and divorce also created perplexing crises for the Jewish state, one of which, as we shall see below, came to bear regarding one of our examples of other Zions.

Most of the independent Jewish communities in this book ceased to exist by the end of the Middle Ages, and it remains difficult to assess whether these groups were fully considered Jews by other, contemporary Jewish groups. In general, though, Jewish religious authorities in the Middle Ages were lenient in their definition of who was a Jew. The long Jewish exile had placed many communities under extreme pressure. Some were isolated from the great centers of Jewish learning and had to rely on their own meager religious resources in applying Jewish law. This, when coupled with the traditional lack of centrality of Jewish religious organization, led to a broad acceptance by Jews of other groups who claimed to be Jews.²⁶

There is no convincing proof that any of the legions of modern groups who claim to be descended from the ancient Lost Tribes of Israel are so,²⁷ and in the Talmud, there was no unanimity as to whether any Jews from the Lost Tribes still existed, and if they did, whether they should be considered Jews.²⁸ The Khazar Jewish kingdom disappeared over ten centu-

ries ago, and despite theories to the contrary, they appear to have offered little in the way of influence over Jewish life in subsequent centuries.²⁹ The Jews of Arabia continued to exist until the twelfth century, but with the rise of more stringent varieties of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula, they had disappeared from everywhere but Yemen by modern times. The Jews of Yemen, long known in the Jewish world, were brought nearly *en masse* to the State of Israel in Operation Magic Carpet in 1949. Their status as Jews was never seriously questioned.³⁰ The royal House of Monobazus failed to have any significant influence over later Judaism. Any Judaized Berbers ceased to exist, or they folded into more established Jewish communities in North Africa.³¹ In modern times, those few Jews still living in the JAR had little difficulty entering the State of Israel as full-fledged Jews, and their numbers were so small they hardly created a crisis for the definition of who is a Jew.³² The only Jewish groups examined here who existed into modern times and ran afoul of the Israeli definition of who is a Jew were the Beta Israel, or Jews of Ethiopia, along with another group of Ethiopians known as the Falash Mura, whom we will next discuss.

WHO IS A JEW: THE BETA ISRAEL AND THE FALASH MURA

In the early years of the State of Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia were not a vital concern to the Israeli government. Many other Jewish communities, particularly in the Muslim world, were in great peril, and in the first decade of Israel's existence, the majority of attention was paid to them.³³ However, after the 1976 revolution in Ethiopia, during which the government of Emperor Haile Selassie was ousted and a Marxist one installed, the plight of the Beta Israel was brought to Israeli attention. As we saw, the Beta Israel had been declared Jews in 1973 by the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, and then by the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi.³⁴ For the purpose of *aliyah*, or emigration to Israel, they were considered valid Jews. The Rabbinical authorities in Israel, relying on the powerful precedents provided by great Jewish scholars from the Middle Ages, did not feel qualified to question the earlier decision about the Jews of Ethiopia. They accepted the group as the descendants of the Lost Tribe of Dan and therefore agreed that they were legally Jews. As the political situation in Ethiopia deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a lasting drought and famine gripped the country. The Beta Israel fled from war-torn, famine-stricken Ethiopia to refugee camps in neighboring Sudan.³⁵ There, with the aid of Jewish relief agencies, a trickle of Beta Israel immigrated to Israel.³⁶ By the early 1980s, the situation had grown appreciably worse, so Operation

Moses was mounted by Israel to bring all of the Beta Israel refugees in Sudan to Israel.³⁷ In 1991, Operation Solomon brought over the bulk of Beta Israel—more than fourteen thousand—from Ethiopia itself.³⁸

In Israel, the Beta Israel were accepted as Jews, but there were dissenting voices. The troubling problem of marriage and divorce was aired. Since the Beta Israel had no knowledge of Rabbinical Judaism, there was some doubt as to whether their marriages and divorces were legally valid. If they were not, all the Beta Israel would become *mamzerim*. A solution was offered: in order to marry, an individual Beta Israel would undergo a symbolic conversion ceremony. There was a great outcry against this by the Beta Israel, so eventually this suggestion was abandoned,³⁹ and it was litigated that the Beta Israel were already Jews. The Beta Israel, like some of the other Jewish groups from exotic areas of the Diaspora, originally had their Jewish credentials questioned,⁴⁰ but as with other groups, after naturalization in Israel, such questions disappeared. Despite scholarly doubts about the Jewish status of the Beta Israel, both the State of Israel and its Rabbinical authorities now accept them as Jews, and more importantly still, consider it legally valid for Israeli Jews to marry Beta Israel men and women.

Although the Beta Israel became Jews through a long historical process, they survived as a group into modern times and had their Jewish status confirmed by ancient and modern Jewish religious leaders. Regardless, some recent scholars have questioned their credentials as Jews. But as both Israelis and Jews, Beta Israel Jewish identity has been supported. Yet during the operations to rescue the Jews of Ethiopia, planners and organizers were confronted with another group who claimed to be Jews, or of Jewish descent, who asked also to be airlifted to Israel. This group, known as the Falash Mura,⁴¹ were mostly unknown outside Ethiopia. Despite their questionable status as Jews, some were allowed to emigrate to Israel if they could prove they were related to Beta Israel living in Israel.⁴² But the majority of them were left in camps in the Sudan and Ethiopia.

Throughout their history, the Beta Israel were confronted with powerful pressures to convert to Christianity. This came from two areas: the Western, mostly Protestant missionaries who worked in the country beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and the local Ethiopian Orthodox Church. So throughout their long history, many Beta Israel converted to Christianity, or Christianized their worship to varying degrees. Accordingly, it is widely believed that the number of people who call themselves Beta Israel has decreased steadily through the centuries.⁴³ After 1855, more organized religious persecutions were staged, and many Beta Israel were converted, either forcibly or voluntarily, to Christianity. Times were

so grave that a group of Beta Israel, stirred up by messianic expectations, decided to immigrate to the Land of Israel in 1862 by undertaking a journey on the Red Sea. Most died en route of starvation and disease.⁴⁴ Other groups of Beta Israel, who came to be called the Falash Mura, converted to Christianity.

The Falash Mura have been described as Ethiopian Marranos, practicing Christianity in public and Judaism in private.⁴⁵ Some see them as simply Christians of Jewish descent, who due to the strong prejudices against intermarriage between Beta Israel and gentile Ethiopians, remained a more or less clearly identifiable group.⁴⁶ As such, they married mainly among themselves since Ethiopian Christians would not accept their conversions as authentic and the Beta Israel would not marry them because they were apostates. Israeli officials have used the term non-Oritawi Falasha to designate them (*Orit* is the word for the Torah in Ge'ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language) in order to distinguish them from Oritawi, or "Torah"—observing Falasha.

The existence of the Falash Mura created problems for Israeli immigration authorities. From other parts of the world, the State of Israel was more willing to accept Jews who had converted to other religions, or just as problematically, knew little about their Jewish heritage. As the door to emigration opened for Soviet citizens during the late 1970s and onward, this was certainly the case for Russian Jews.⁴⁷ But for the Falash Mura, the situation was clouded by ignorance, prejudice, and fear. Israeli officials knew little about this community and did not know the exact nature of their apostasy from Judaism. Was it voluntary or forced? Was their Christianity real or feigned? Religious Jewish law has rules about such conversions: although a Jew may sin, including conversion to another religion, he or she is still considered Jewish.⁴⁸ In such cases, the person or people who converted are usually reconverted to Judaism in some small ceremony. This appears to have happened during the late 1980s when it was apparent to the Falash Mura that the State of Israel would soon launch another campaign to bring the Jews of Ethiopia to Israel. Many Falash Mura converged on the capital of Addis Ababa, seeking to be reconverted to Judaism by Beta Israel priests so that they would be deemed eligible for *aliyah*, or emigration to Israel.⁴⁹ And indeed, those who went through reconversion ceremonies were allowed to enter Israel.

When Operation Solomon was mounted in May of 1991, about 14,500 Ethiopian Jews were flown out of the country, along with about 2,000 to 5,000 Falash Mura.⁵⁰ The Chief Rabbinate requested Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to save the remaining Falash Mura who had not been reconverted, but some 3,000 were left in Ethiopia because the Israeli officials

in charge of the airlift considered them “Falasha Christians.”⁵¹ The issue is particularly thorny since the relationship between the Beta Israel and the Falash Mura is complex. In some cases, Beta Israel and Falash Mura groups have had no relations. In others, frequent interactions have been fostered by ties of kinship. As with so many definitive lines in Ethiopia, the division between who was a Jew and who was a Christian is far from clear.⁵²

Most Falash Mura remain in Ethiopia as of this writing. The State of Israel vacillated in their commitment for further Falash Mura immigration.⁵³ Still, some Israeli officials have expressed fears about wider Falash Mura immigration. Some are aware of the nebulous line separating Ethiopian Christians from Ethiopian Jews and fear that allowing the remaining Falash Mura to emigrate will open the door for thousands upon thousands of “Jews” to flee poverty in Ethiopia for relative prosperity in Israel.⁵⁴

Amongst the dozens of peoples who claim Jewish descent, or claim to be remnants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, the Beta Israel, and their relatives the Falash Mura, are the only group as of this writing to have convinced the Israeli government that their claim is justified. According to the Rabbinate in Israel, the Beta Israel *are* descended from the lost tribe of Dan. They once possessed an independent kingdom in the Ethiopian highlands, which was noted by significant Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this conclusion, both normative Jewish tradition and modern Israeli state policy have found a place for the members of this other Zion in contemporary Israel. Both the Beta Israel and the Falash Mura have moved from another Zion to the traditional Zion, forming a connective chain between these two examples of independent Jewish political life.

THE OTHER JUDAISMS

The existence of independent Jewish states outside the Land of Israel significantly complicates and enriches any study of Jewish history. These kingdoms, states, and confederations of tribes pose interesting questions about the nature of Judaism, its forms throughout the ages, its responses to civil and religious crises, and above all, its marvelous adaptability. The evolving Rabbinical Judaism of the Khazars, the Jewish-influenced practices of the Beta Israel and their ancestors, the mysterious *ayhud*, or Jews of Lake Tana, the Pharisaic Judaism of the House of Monobazus, the mysterious Jewish status of the Berber tribes, and the secular Yid-

dish Jewish culture of Goles Nationalism and its offspring, the JAR, are not sidelines in Jewish history or a serious detour away from the age-old dream of an independent Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Rather, these states, some of which were well-known in their contemporary Jewish worlds, were markers of Jewish collective self-awareness—certainly in the Middle Ages, but also in modern times. They became a way for a people without a national territory, long divorced from political and military self-determination, to view their own political aspirations through a nontraditional, non-Rabbinical lens. Just as there is no one definition of who is a Jew, so there is no one example of what is a Jewish state. The other Zions allowed Jews to imagine what a Jewish polity could be—even if it was far away from the traditional lands of Zion.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Early Zionists leaders did not believe that political autonomy ever existed among Jews in the Diaspora. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, said: "This nation will be built from many tribes. It is necessary to melt down the debris of Jewish humanity which is scattered throughout the world and will come to Israel, in the melting pot of Independence and national sovereignty. It is necessary to create a Hebrew character and style which could not have existed in the Diaspora, among a people without a homeland, without Independence and national freedom." From Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*, trans. Arlen Neal Weinstein (New York, An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 292.

2. For more on the Red Jews, see Andrew Colin Gow, *The Red Jews: Antisemitism in an Apocalyptic Age 1200-1600* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).

3. Frequent reference in this work to the early years of the State of Israel will be from Tom Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*.

4. This was one of the early planks of political Zionism. The location of a Jewish state mattered less to certain political Zionists than the establishment of the state. The various proposals included an offer by the British government in 1903 for a Jewish homeland on the Guas Ngishu Plateau in Kenya, or the so-called "Uganda Proposal," which was finally rejected by the Zionist Congress in 1905. Also in 1903 the British government offered Herzl El Arish on the Sinai Peninsula—a stone's throw from Palestine. But a British agent in Egypt refused to allow the colony to draw water from the Nile River, making the area unsuitable for habitation. Eventually, a group of Zionists split from the main organization of the Zionist Congress over this issue to form their own "Territorialist" party in 1905 called the Jewish Territorial Organization, or JTO. This group did not seek Palestine as the homeland for the Jews. They investigated settlement schemes in Angola, Tripolitania, Texas, Mexico, Australia, and Canada. Of course, nothing came from these schemes, and in 1925, the JTO was disbanded. But Territorialism did not die there. Ten years later the Freeland League was established and drew up plans for mass immigration of Jews to western Australia, Surinam, and other areas of the world. They were no more successful than the JTO. After the State of Israel was formed, the Freeland League disbanded. See Walter Laquer, *A History of Zionism*

(New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 414. There have been various attempts to found "other Zions," which were more in the realm of quixotic fantasy than the seven examples explored here. See Martin Gilbert, *The Atlas of Jewish History* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 106–107, for a pictorial display of these experiments in Jewish self-government.

5. Herzl was well-known as a journalist for his skill at writing feuilleton, which is variously defined as the part of a European newspaper devoted to light fiction, reviews, and articles of general entertainment; it can also be a novel appearing in installments.

6. In addition to *The Jewish State*, an excellent approach to Herzl's motivation and thinking can be found in his journals. See Theodor Herzl, *Theodor Herzl, Excerpts from His Diaries* (New York: Scopus Publishing Company, 1941).

7. For the effect of the Dreyfus Affair on Herzl, see Ernst Pawel, *The Labyrinth of Exile, A Life of Theodore Herzl* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 206–210.

8. For Zionism's early connection to European nineteenth century nationalist movements, see Benjamin Beit-Hallami, *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 32–33. For a long and detailed account of the rise of Zionism in its various forms, see Laqueur, *A History of Zion*.

9. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question* (New York: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1946), 72.

10. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 92. Herzl did not wish to openly express his opinions about Palestine's native Arab population. Publicly he uttered a common, early Zionist position about the Arabs: they would benefit from Jewish rule in Palestine. Both peoples would reap economic and cultural benefits from the Jewish state. In private, he expressed reservations about a large minority of Arabs in the Jewish state. In 1895 he wrote in his journal that "We must expropriate gently . . . We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our country . . . Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly." From Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims, A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 21–22. In general, early mainstream Zionism approached the founding of a Jewish state in Palestine cautiously, taking a gradual approach to the settlement of the land. Another approach to Zionism, promoted by the Revisionist movement, took a more strident position, wishing to more openly pursue the settlement of Palestine. See Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, chapter 7, "In Blood and Fire: Jabotinsky and Revisionism," 338–383.

11. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 95. Herzl's lack of affinity for the Land of Israel, as well as the location of the Jewish state, is not without previous exemplars. Leon Pinsker, whose 1882 work *Auto-Emancipation* is considered an early Zionist classic, did not think the Land of Israel was suitable for settlement. He believed that some portion of North America could be turned into a Jewish homeland. See Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 17. Various plans to settle Jews in distant lands were either attempted or abandoned through the years. The most notable was by the

Jewish Colonization Association, founded in 1891 for the purpose of settling Jews in North and South America. The United States Congress briefly contemplated settling expelled European Jews in Alaska in the 1940s, but the plan was blocked by Alaskan influence in Congress.

12. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 96.
13. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 96.
14. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 145.
15. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 146.
16. The question of what language should be spoken in the Jewish state was a matter of hot contention. The Zionists eventually came out on the side of an emergent Modern Hebrew, while another group with somewhat different nationalistic goals supported Yiddish. This topic is explored fully in chapter 8. The revival of Hebrew as a modern, spoken vernacular language is often viewed as one of the greatest achievements of Zionism. Other national movements failed to revive dead or slumbering languages, such as the use of Gaelic in Ireland.
17. Ahad Ha'am, *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic: Basic Writings of Ahad Ha'am* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 43.
18. Ahad Ha'am, *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic*, 79.
19. This question we will return to in chapter 9, pages 159–161.
20. For a full look at the implementation of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine, see Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 2001).
21. For a wider look at the motivations for Jewish immigration to Israel right after independence, see Segev, *The First Israelis*, chapter 4, “The First Million,” 95–116. Segev examines the complex causes for immigration, including how Israeli agents created conditions to foster Jewish immigration when there was little previous impetus.
22. This is a question we will return to in chapter 9, pages 151–161. For more on early Israeli national identity, see Segev, *The First Israelis*, chapter 9, “The Quest for National Identity,” 265–295.
23. For more on dialects in ancient Hebrew, see Gary Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings* (Bethsehda, MD: CDL Press, 2002) and Gary Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). For a criticism of Rendsburg’s work, see William Schniedewind and Daniel Sivan, “The Elijah-Elisha Narratives: A Test Case for the Northern Dialect of Hebrew,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 87, no. 3/4 (January–April 1997): 303–337. The linguistic, cultural, religious, and political differences between the northern and southern people of early Israel eventually led to the break up of the United Monarchy into two states, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judea.
24. This topic is explored in chapter 2, page 30.
25. The examination of Prester John and his letters begins on pages 25–28.
26. For more on the Jewish presence in China, particularly in Kaifeng, see Sidney Shapiro, trans. and ed. *Jews in Old China: Studies by Chinese Scholars* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1988) and Michael Pollack, *Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992).

Society, 1980). For an extended treatment of the assimilation of the Jews of Kaifeng see Nathan Katz, "The Judaisms of Kaifeng and Cochin: Parallel and Divergent Styles of Religious Acculturation," *Numen*, vol. 42 (1995): 118–140.

27. We will see this on page 54 with the example of Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915–970 CE), the vizier to the Muslim Caliph of Spain.

28. The Biblical accounts of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel are legendary. There is little archeological evidence that Jerusalem was more than a small town during the traditional dating of the kingdoms of David and Solomon. For more on this controversial topic, see Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006). This is part of an ongoing debate in the world of biblical studies between minimalist approaches, which view the Bible as containing mainly legendary material, and the more maximal approaches, which see a core historical truth to many of the Bible's stories, although couched in the language of historical myth.

29. The Khazar Kingdom is examined in chapter 4, page 53.

30. The Jews of Ethiopia, or the Beta Israel, also called Falashas, will be examined in chapter 3, page 31.

31. The Jewish Kingdom of Himyar will be examined in the first part of chapter 5, page 91. Du Nuwas, or "Lord Sidelock," the Jewish Himyarite king, is treated in chapter 5, page 94.

32. The Jewish Kingdom of Adiabene is explored in chapter 6, page 97.

33. The Jews of the Hijaz are explored in the latter part of chapter 5, page 86.

34. The so-called Berber Jewish Queen, the Kahina (al-Kahina), is taken up in chapter 7, page 113.

35. The Jewish Autonomous Region, or the JAR (Birobidzhan), and Goles Nationalism will be examined in chapter 8, page 123.

CHAPTER 2

1. 2 Chronicles 30:6.

2. For more about the Samaritans, see L. H. Schiffman, "The Samaritans in Tannaitic Halakah," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 75, no. 4 (April 1985): 323–350, and Alan D. Crown, "Redating the Schism between the Judeans and the Samaritans," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 82, No 1/2 (July– October 1991): 17–50. The Samaritans continue to exist today as a small religious minority in various locations in the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories and number no more than seven hundred people. They consider Mount Gerizim near Nablus their holiest site, and each Passover Samaritan priests offer sacrifices on its summit. The small population of the Samaritans and until recently, their reluctance to accept converts has threatened the future of this ancient community.

3. Ezekiel 37:21–23.

4. Isaiah 11:11.

5. The second book of Esdras mentions the Lost Tribes of Israel and their retreat to the country of Arzareth, probably a corruption of the Hebrew term "another

land." 2 Esdras 13:45, Wayne Meeks, ed., 1804, *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, NRSV (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

6. Josephus writes about the Sabbath River in *The Jewish War*, book 7, chapter 5. He mentions it while relating other events and says it can be found in Syria. It flows for six days but on the seventh is dry. Due to this peculiarity, it is called the Sabbatical River, since it rests on the seventh day, like the Jews. He does not discuss the river in a Lost Tribe context, but his knowledge of this legend suggests that the myth of the Sabbath River, in whatever form, at least dates to the first century of the Common Era. Perhaps early forms of this story were eventually transformed into the Sabbath River that held the Lost Tribes captive in their lands. Josephus, trans H. St. J. Thackery, *The Jewish War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961). The Sabbath River is also mentioned by Pliny the Elder, 23–79 CE, but with different details. John C. Reeves, *Trajectories in Near Eastern Apocalyptic* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 205–206.

7. Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel, The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2002), 6.

8. Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes*, 6, 8.

9. We will see this later when we examine Talmudic discussion about the conversion of the House of Monobazus in Adiabene, chapter 6, pages 106–109.

10. Assyrian royal documents and monumental inscriptions refer to the Northern Kingdom of Israel over a span of some one hundred fifty years. For examples of these, see Brad E. Kelle, "What's in a Name? Neo-Assyrian Designations for the Northern Kingdom and Their Implications for Israelite History and Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 121, no. 4. (Winter, 2002): 639–666. For a general survey of the Northern Kingdom in Assyrian sources see K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Deportation of the Israelites," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 117, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 201–227. Specific reference is made to the deportation of the Kingdom of Israel, called Samaria in the documents, in a series of documents which catalog Sargon's military victories: "From the year of my accession to fifteenth year of my reign . . . I besieged and captured Samaria, carrying off 27,290 of the people who dwelt therein." From Daniel David Lukenbill, vol. II, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

11. See Peidong Shen et al., "Reconstruction of Patrilineages and Matrilineages of Samaritans and Other Israeli Populations From Y-Chromosome and Mitochondrial DNA Sequence Variation," *Human Mutation*, vol. 24 (2004): 248–260.

12. Eldad ha-Dani is explored in more detail in the next chapter. Also see A. Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? II. Eldad the Danite," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (January 1889): 95–114.

13. Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore, Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1956), 526–529. This version of "The Little Red Jews" is from a *groschen*, or penny Yiddish chapbook from 1912 and published in Vilna. But its sources ultimately go back to a tale by Gershom ben Eliezer Halevi Judels, a Yiddish writer from Prague, who wrote a famous travel book called *Gelilot Eretz Yisroel* in 1634. However, the material within it goes back much further than the seventeenth century.

14. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 526.

15. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 526.
16. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 527.
17. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 529.
18. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 529.
19. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 529.
20. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 529.
21. Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 529.
22. "Prester" is a version of the Greek word for priest.
23. See "The Acts of Thomas," in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, M. R. James, translation and notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 364–438. Some Christian groups in south India still identify themselves as Thomas Christians. They date the founding with the arrival of Saint Thomas in India.
24. For an account of the situation in the Crusader Kingdoms at roughly the time of circulation of Prester John's letter, see Bernard Hamilton, *The Leper King and His Heirs, Baldwin IV and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), particularly chapter 3, "The Kingdom," 44–62 and chapter 4, "The International Status of the Kingdom," 63–83. The Crusader Kingdoms were increasingly menaced by Muslim powers to the east and cut off from aid to the west during this period. For a broader picture of the Crusades and the Crusader Kingdoms in the Holy Land, see Thomas F. Madden, ed., *Crusades, The Illustrated History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).
25. This is another powerful component of medieval European wish fulfillment. Various estimates have put infant mortality rates during the European Middle Ages at 30 to 50 percent.
26. Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 43.
27. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 43.
28. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 145.
29. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 145.
30. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 145.
31. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, 145.
32. The discovery of America fostered the identification of the Red Jews with the American Indians. One prominent Dutch Jewish leader, Manasseh Ben Israel (1604–1657) was a proponent of this idea; see Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 520–526. In a general sense, this idea of the Lost Tribes being located in the New World was one of the founding ideas of the Mormon movement in the United States in the nineteenth century.
33. A. Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? III. Early Translations of the Bible and Commentators: Abraham Bar Hiyya, Benjamin of Tudela, Prester John, Obadiah of Bertinoro, Abraham Levi and His Contemporaries," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (April 1889): 195.
34. See chapter 3, page 28.
35. A. Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes?" III. 196–197.
36. See page 47.
37. Tudor Parfitt, a professor of modern Jewish studies at the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East at the University of London, is perhaps the most well-known of these modern scholars who are interested

in the Lost Tribes. His main candidate is the Lemba people of Africa. See Tudor Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City* (New York: Vintage Edition, 2000). According to Parfitt, recent genetic studies of the Lemba peoples bolster their claims to be a Lost Tribe of Israel. According to one study, 50 percent of the Lemba Y chromosomes are Semitic in origin, approximately 40 percent are Negroid, and the ancestry of the remainder cannot be resolved. From A. B. Spurdle and T. Jenkins, "The Origins of the Lemba 'Black Jews' of Southern Africa: Evidence from p12F2 and Other Y-chromosome Markers, *American Journal of Human Genetics*, vol. 59, no. 5 (November 1996): 1126–1133.

CHAPTER 3

1. For an article on the famine in Ethiopia in 1984, see the following BBC article: news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/703958.stm.
2. Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses* (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), 116–121.
3. For more, see Stephen Specter, *Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4. Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 37.
5. Ethiopia contains other groups with a distinctive Hebraic character in their customs and practices. One is known as the Qemants, who live west of Gondar, not far from the traditional lands of Beta Israel settlement. The Qemants believe, like Ethiopian Christians and the Beta Israel, that there is only one god, and they venerate biblical characters from Adam down to Moses. They practice a form of animism, performing animal sacrifice near sacred trees and groves. For more, see Richard Pankhurst, "The Falashas, or Judaic Ethiopians, in Their Christian Ethiopian Setting," *African Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 365 (October 1992): 576–577.
6. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 104–105.
7. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 88.
8. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 82.
9. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 103.
10. For more on the Pharisees, see Louis Finkelstein, *The Pharisees: A Sociological Background of That Faith*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1938). Of course, the Pharisees were one of the religious groups in first-century Palestine that often offered resistance to Jesus.
11. For more on Philo, see *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, C. D. Yonge, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993).
12. The Essenes were a sectarian group during the time period of so-called Second Temple Judaism. The Essenes were known to both first-century Jewish writers Philo of Alexandria and Josephus. For more see J. Murphy-O'Connor, "The Essenes in Palestine," *Biblical Archeologist*, vol. 40, no. 3 (September 1977): 100–124.
13. In his *History of the Church*, Eusebius (c. 275–339) mentions many early Christian groups who were most likely "Jewish" Christians, i.e., followers of Jesus who did not accept the deification of Jesus. One he called the Ebionites,

who consider Jesus the “child of a normal union between a man and Mary.” Another group observed the Sabbath and the “whole Jewish system.” From this, and from some parts of the New Testament (like Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15, in which there is a dispute among members of the early Church as to whether Gentile converts of the Jesus Movement should be circumcised) comes an indication that “Jewish” practices were not shed from the Jesus Movement and Christianity immediately, but over some span of time. In some cases, like Christianity in Ethiopia, Jewish practices were never entirely purged. From Eusebius, trans G. A. Williamson, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965.)

14. There is a variant of this tale in the book of 2 Chronicles 9:1–12.
15. 1 Kings 10:1–10.
16. 1 Kings 11:1–2.
17. 1 Kings 11:5.
18. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 75.
19. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 75.
20. William Budge, *Kebra Nagast, or The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyek*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 18.
21. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 29.
22. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 19.
23. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 20.
24. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 29.
25. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 30.
26. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 34–35.
27. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 27.
28. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 38.
29. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 69.
30. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 140–141.
31. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 65.
32. Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 65.
33. Acts 8: 26–40.
34. The ending “i” in Semitic languages signifies group identity. Therefore a Dani is a Danite.
35. Ausubel, *Jewish Folklore*, 517.
36. Ausubel, *Jewish Folklore*, 518.
37. Ausubel, *Jewish Folklore*, 518.
38. Ausubel, *Jewish Folklore*, 518.
39. Ausubel, *Jewish Folklore*, 519.
40. James Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews, A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 20.
41. In the first few decades of the Common Era, two Jewish groups practiced a monasticism of sorts: the Therapeuta in Alexandria, Egypt, and the Essenes, on the shores of the Dead Sea in Roman Judea. The Therapeuta were Hellenized Jews who lived communally with quarters for men and women, appeared to have refrained from sexual relations, had few possessions, and gathered together for group worship. For a contemporary account of the Therapeuta by the first-cen-

tury Bible exegete Philo of Alexandria, see his *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 698–706.

42. For more on the community of Jews on the island of Elephantine on the upper Nile, see Boulos Ayad Ayad, “From the Archive of Ananiah Son of Azariah: A Jew from Elephantine,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 56, no. 1. (January 1997): 37–50; Bezalel Porten, “The Religion of the Jews of Elephantine in Light of the Hermopolis Papyri,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (April 1969): 116–121; and especially Emil G. Kraeling, “New Light on the Elephantine Colony,” *Biblical Archeology Review*, vol. 15, no. 3 (September 1952): 49–67 about the important papyri housed at the Brooklyn Museum.

43. See chapter 5, starting on page 91 for the Jewish Kingdom of Himyar.

44. Early Jewish interest in the Beta Israel was spurred by the reports of the French–Jewish Semitist Joseph Halevy who asserted that the Beta Israel were indeed Jews. See Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), x. In general, in this early period the Jewish world was largely skeptical that the Beta Israel were Jews.

45. See pages 61–64 for more on the Falash Mura.

46. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*, 49.

47. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*, 55.

48. Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 59.

49. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 69–73; Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*, 66–67.

50. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 79–96.

51. This is the brother of the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama (1469–1527).

52. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 85–88.

53. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*, 83.

54. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, 115.

55. The discussion of the Falash Mura can be found starting on page 61. Recent genetic testing has concluded that the Beta Israel do not share a common ancestry with other Jewish groups, lending credence to the theory that they are descended from Ethiopian ancestors. See Gerard Lucotte and Pierre Smets, “Origins of Falasha Jews Studied by Haplotypes of the Y Chromosome,” *Human Biology* 71, no. 6 (December 1999): 989–993.

CHAPTER 4

1. Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State-Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 233.

2. Like nearly all nomadic Turkic groups, the ultimate geographical origin of the Khazars is unknown and will most likely remain so. Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 233–236.

3. Giving the letter to Byzantine Jews seemed to be a good strategy since Khazaria and Byzantium enjoyed trade and diplomatic relations. In fact, a Byzantine

emperor and a Khazarian “princess” were wedded in a strategic alliance, and their son, Leo IV, ruled Byzantium from 775 to 780 CE. He is known to history as Leo the Khazar. Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 238.

4. Rabbi Chisdai ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” translated by N. Daniel Korobkin, in Yehudah HaLevi, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 2009), 639–640.
5. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 645.
6. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 646.
7. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 646–647.
8. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 647.
9. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 649.
10. ibn Shaprut, “Letter from Rabbi Chisdai to King Yoseph,” 654.
11. King Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” trans N. Daniel Korobkin, in Yehudah HaLevi, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 2009), 656, 658.
12. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 658.
13. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 658
14. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 658.
15. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 659.
16. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 659–660.
17. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 660.
18. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 660.
19. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 661.
20. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 661.
21. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 661.
22. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 662.
23. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 664–665.
24. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 665.
25. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 666.
26. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 666.
27. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 667, 668.
28. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 668–669.
29. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 669.
30. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 670.
31. Yoseph, “Response of King Yoseph to Rabbi Chisdai,” 671.
32. D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), 127.
33. See Yehudah HaLevi, *The Kuzari: In Defense of the Despised Faith*, 2nd ed., trans. N. Daniel Korobkin, (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim) 2009.
34. One reason that the letter was presumed to be a forgery was the relatively late date of its first publication. In 1577, Isaac Abraham Akrish published a small pamphlet called “Voice of the Messenger of Good News,” in part intended to raise the hopes of Jews by proving that strong Jewish kingdoms once existed. In this work Akrish reproduced the Khazar correspondence. Later, a manuscript collected by Abraham Firkowitch (1786–1874) contained a longer version of the Khazar letter. Firkowitch had a sizeable collection of old manuscripts, many genuine and many recent forgeries, so his Khazar documents were suspect. Disputes about the veracity of the Khazar letters continued until relatively recently. Few scholars

now doubt they are genuine. Proof of their medieval origin can be found in a work composed by Jehuda b. Barzillai, in 1100 CE, called *Sepher ha-Ittim*, a work on the Jewish holidays; there, he quotes the letter from the Khazar king. It can be little doubted that he had the correspondence in front of him. Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), 30–32.

35. For a more detailed treatment of the contents of the Cairo Geniza, see S. D. Goitein "The Document of the Cairo Geniza as a Source for Mediterranean Social History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 80, no. 2 (April–June 1960): 91–100. The University of Cambridge has many documents from the Cairo Geniza digitally scanned and available for viewing on their web page: www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/.

36. S. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 3, no. 2 (October 1912), 213.

37. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 214.

38. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 214.

39. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 215.

40. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 215.

41. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 215.

42. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 216.

43. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 216.

44. HaLevi revealed some knowledge of the legends of the Khazars and their connection to Judaism. At the beginning of the Second Essay in *The Kuzari*, the brief introduction explains a variation of the cave story found in the Schechter Letter. HaLevi, *The Kuzari*, 55–56.

45. Schechter, "An Unknown Khazar Document," 202. For a reedition and retranslation of the Schechter Text, see Norman Golb & Omeljan Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents of the Tenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), chapter 10.

46. Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 14.

47. Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 13.

48. Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 15.

49. Golb and Pritsak, *Khazarian Hebrew Documents*, 27–28.

50. Peter Golden, "Khazaria and Judaism" in *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe, Turks, Khazars and Qipchaqs* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 2003), 134.

51. Golden, *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe*, 153.

52. Golden, *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe*, 136–137.

53. For an extended treatment of the Arab-Khazar Wars, see Kevin Alan Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*. 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 125–132 and Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, 41–87.

54. Golden, *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe*, 141.

55. J. G. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," *Folklore*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Dec. 31, 1917): 386.

56. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," 388. It appears that the capital city of the Khazar may have been discovered by Russian archeologists. See the AP article in Haaretz.com, 9-22-08, www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1023383.html.

57. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," 390.

58. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," 390.

59. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," 395.
60. Frazer, "The Killing of the Khazar Kings," 398.
61. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 240. For a summary of Muslim writing about the Khazars, see Golden, *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe*, 140–142.
62. Golden, *Nomads and their Neighbors in the Russian Steppe*, 149–150.
63. Many attempts have been made to place the Khazars in a more prominent position in the annals of Jewish history. Perhaps the most famous and controversial was made by the writer and novelist Arthur Koestler in his book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*. In part 2 of this work, he attempts to explain the rapid rise of Ashkenazi Judaism in Europe at the turn of the first millennium on the migration of the Khazars following the destruction of their kingdom. His thesis was met by vociferous objections. The noted scholar of the Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, on being asked by the *New York Review of Books* to review *The Thirteenth Tribe*, wrote:

"Sigmund Freud told the Jews their religion was foisted upon them by an Egyptian, so that there was nothing for the Jews to be proud of. The Jews found it baseless but rather amusing. Some Gentiles loved it because it would teach those supercilious Jews a lesson. Arthur Koestler wants to give them the rest by telling them that they were not even Jews and that those damned Ashkenazim from Russia, Romania, and Hungary who had invented Zionism had not even the right to ask for Israel as their homeland—which their Khazaric forefathers had never seen. . . . There is nothing more to be said by me about Koestler's scholarship."

From Cynthia Ozick, "The Heretic: The Mythic Passions of Gershom Scholem," *New Yorker*, September 20, 2002. Apparently, Scholem found Koestler's thesis anti-Zionist, since if the descendants of the Khazars—the Ashkenazi Jews—were not genetically or ancestrally Jews, they could lay no claim to the Land of Israel. Scholem would probably have been heartened by modern genetic studies that appear to disprove Koestler's theory. See Nicholas Wade, "In DNA, New Clues to Jewish Roots," *New York Times*, May 14, 2002.

Even today, assertions of the Khazar ancestry of European Jews continue to be declared. Recently, Israeli scholar Shlomo Sand, of Tel Aviv University, has written a book called *The Invention of the Jewish People*, which claims that European Jews are descended from the Khazars. He asserts that there were no significant Jewish exiles after the Roman defeat of the Jewish Revolt in Palestine in the first century and that most Eastern European Jews are converted Khazarian Jews who fled their country when it was defeated. Therefore, Sand believes that the Jews who created Zionism in the nineteenth century had no right to inherit Palestine. Unfortunately, Khazar studies have often been marred by anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, which often clouds the picture of the historicity of this group and their rightful place in Jewish history.

CHAPTER 5

1. For more on Operation Magic Carpet, see Reuben Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry: Origins, Culture and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

2. Small groups of Jews continue to remain in north Yemen, close to the ill-defined border between north Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In recent years, they have come under increasing persecution from fundamentalist Islamic groups in Yemen. As of this writing, the State of Israel is actively trying to bring these Jews to Israel.
3. Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2–5.
4. The account of the Magi is found only in Matthew 2:1–12.
5. For an account of pagan, polytheistic religion in Arabia, see Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 139–166.
6. For more on the fascinating history of the Arabic kingdom of Nabatea, see Jane Taylor, *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
7. The Jewish Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen is treated on page 91.
8. The Qur'an records some of the episodes of Mohammad's contact with the Jews of Arabia. Purportedly, Sura 33, verses 9–32 is about the Battle of the Trench, where Muslim armies fought the Banu Qurayza. Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 10–11.
9. See pages 34–37.
10. Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Volume III, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 66, and Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 146.
11. For a photograph of the fortress of the Khaybar Jews, see Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and a Source Book* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), following page 90, illustration 1.
12. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 5.
13. *Banu* derives from the Arabic word for son: *ibn*, or *bin*. The tribes were usually named after an eponymous founder, and its members were his or her children.
14. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 9.
15. See Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 115–118 for Mohammad's Ordinance for Medina, sometimes called the Medina Constitution or Charter of Medina.
16. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 14–15.
17. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands*, 16.
18. Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 100–104.
19. For a broad look at the documents in the Cairo Geniza, see the multivolume S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World As Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–1993).
20. Newby, *A History of The Jews of Arabia*, 100.
21. Newby, *A History of The Jews of Arabia*, 101–102.
22. Newby, *A History of The Jews of Arabia*, 102.
23. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 45.
24. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 46–47.
25. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 140–141.

26. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 147
27. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 146.
28. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 146.
29. Zeev Rubin, "Judaism and Rahmanite Monotheism in the Himyarite Kingdom of the Fifth Century," in *Israel and Ishmael: Studies in Muslim Jewish Relations*, ed. Tudor Parfitt (New York: St. Martins Press, 2000), 36–37.
30. Rubin, "Judaism and Rahmanite Monotheism," 36–37.
31. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 147; for a more detailed treatment of these inscriptions, see Rubin, "Judaism and Rahmanite Monotheism," 32–51.
32. See pages 54–64.
33. Rubin, "Judaism and Rahmanite Monotheism," 38.
34. Michael Lecker, "The Conversion of Himyar to Judaism and the Jewish Banu Hadl of Medina," in *Jews and Arabs in Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia*, ed. Michael Lecker (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), 135.
35. The biblical passage related to shoring hair on the side of the head is found in Leviticus 19:27. Many ultraorthodox religious Jews today do not shave the sides of their head. Called *payot* in Hebrew, which means "corners," the word is usually translated as "sidelocks" in English.
36. The martyrs of Najran had a lasting impact on Christianity in the Near East, as well as the Byzantine-Greek Orthodox tradition. For some aspects of this, see Irfan Shahid, "Byzantium in South Arabia," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 33 (1979): 23–94.
37. For an account of Dhu Nuwas' defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians (an account heavily influenced by modern ideas of Jewish political and military self-determination), see Monroe Rosenthal and Isaac Mozeson, *Wars of the Jews: A Military History from Biblical to Modern Times* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990), 140–148.
38. For a more detailed history of the Jews of Yemen, from the earliest legends of their presence in the country to the present, see Ahroni, *Yemenite Jewry*.
39. The promised boundaries of the Kingdom of Israel changed frequently in the Bible, but the most famous formula found in Deuteronomy 11:24, "Every place where you set your foot will be yours: Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the Euphrates River to the western sea" appears to be the most expansive.
40. Newby, *A History of The Jews of Arabia*, 47–48; for a general article on the Jewish Himyar Kingdom (again, one that leans heavily in the direction of modern Jewish nationalist historiography) see Joseph Adler, "The Jewish Kingdom of Himyar (Yemen): Its Rise and Fall," *Midstream*, May 1, 2000, Theodore Herzl Foundation.

CHAPTER 6

1. For a detailed history of Parthia, see Neilson C. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1938).
2. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, 240–269.
3. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, 245.

4. For a general look at Josephus, see Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 2002).

5. Debevoise calls their realm a “robber kingdom” (Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, 156) since the two brothers began their career as fugitives gathering protection money, gradually climbing to the heights of political and military power until they threatened the reign of the king of Parthia himself; Josephus claims that the enmity of the Babylonians to the Jews was in no small part due to the abuses of their reign.

6. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, 163–164.

7. Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 153.

8. For an extended treatment of the Herodians, see Nikos Kokkinos, *The Herodian Dynasty: Origins, Role in Society and Eclipse* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.)

9. The style of the Adiabene narrative is considerably different than the rest of the *Antiquities*, lending credence to the theory that Josephus was using another source. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene in Josephus and Rabbinic Sources,” in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 294.

10. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931); the Adiabene rulers were most likely Zoroastrians. The names in the text are a clue. As we will see, the name Izates is derived from the word *ized*, “the venerable,” a technical term in the Zoroastrian religion. So, Josephus’s etymology here is misguided. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 270, note 2.

11. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13.

12. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13.

13. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13–15; Spasina Charax was at the mouth of the Tigris River, near present-day Basra in southern Iraq. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 270, note 3.

14. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 13–15.

15. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 15.

16. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 15.

17. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.

18. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.

19. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.

20. The account of Joseph is found in Genesis chapters 39–50.

21. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.

22. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.

23. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 19.

24. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 21.

25. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 21.

26. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 21–23.

27. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 23–25.

28. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 25.

29. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 25–27.

30. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 27–31.

31. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 35.

32. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 35–37.

33. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 37.
34. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 39–41.
35. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 41.
36. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 41–43.
37. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 43.
38. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 47.
39. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 47.
40. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 49.
41. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 49.
42. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 49.
43. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 51.
44. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 51; Queen Helena's tomb is mentioned in numerous ancient sources and is used as a landmark in another of Josephus's works, *The Jewish War*. Most archeologists agree that the tomb is located in the Valley of the Kings, just north of the old city walls of Jerusalem, E. L. Sukenik, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 26 (April 1927), 8–9. In 2007, archeologists working on a dig beneath a parking lot in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem may have found the remains of Queen Helena's house. The structure was destroyed during the revolt against Rome in 70 CE. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22137575/.
45. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 51.
46. Treated from pages 107–109.
47. For more on the tomb of Queen Helena in Jerusalem, see L.Y. Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs: Part Three," in *Biblical Archaeologist*, vol. 45, no. 1 (Winter 1982): 45–53.
48. Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: an Academic Commentary*, VI *Sukka Tractate, I* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 4; and Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 298–299.
49. Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: an Academic Commentary*, XVI *Bavli Tractate Nazir* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 70–72 and Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 298.
50. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 298.
51. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 300.
52. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 299.
53. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 300.
54. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 301–302.
55. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 301.
56. Schiffman, "The Conversion of the Royal House of Abiabene," 301.
57. See page 101.
58. Jacob Neusner, "The Jews in Pagan Armenia," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 3 (July–September 1964): 234.
59. This was the thesis of Jacob Neusner's article on Jewish Adiabene: see Jacob Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 83, no. 1 (March 1964): 60–66.
60. Neusner made a great deal of this point: see Neusner, "The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism," 63. More contemporary scholars have disagreed with him that Adiabene contributed significantly to the support of the revolt. See Tessa

Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society*, 183–184, and note 25 on 184. It seems there were not any significant numbers of Diaspora Jews involved in the revolt against Rome.

61. Jacob Neusner, “The Conversion of Adiabene to Christianity,” *Numen*, vol. 13, Fasc. 2 (August 1966), 144.

62. See Richard Gottheil, “Adiabene,” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1901–1906), 192 for references to the two Jews mentioned with Adiabene surnames and for the scorpion only found in Adiabene.

63. This can be found in chapter 19, Book Two of Josephus’s *The Jewish War*.

64. Gottheil, “Abiabene,” 192.

65. Gottheil, “Abiabene,” 192.

66. Kahle saw a fluid connection of the Jewish converts in Adiabene and the rest of Eastern and Palestinian Judaism. The people of Adiabene most likely spoke Aramaic, as did the Jews of Roman Judea, and thus had easy access to many Jewish holy works. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza*, 272–273.

CHAPTER 7

1. For a general history of the Berbers, see Michael Brett and Elizabeth Frentress, *The Berbers* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996). For one specific example of unique Berber Islamic religious practice, see the short treatment of saint veneration, 225–230. Also, as in North Africa in general, the Berbers both before and after their conversion to Islam venerated saints at holy shrines, usually near a natural formation like a rock, a spring, or a tree. For a more extended treatment of Berber nature veneration and its particular expression in the Jews of Morocco, see Eric Maroney, *Religious Syncretism* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 84–87. For an even longer treatment, Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration among the Jews of Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

2. Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 3–4.

3. For a full treatment of the Kahina throughout history, see Abdelmajid Hanoun, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories: The Legend of the Kahina, A North African Heroine* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001). In colonial and post-colonial times, the Kahina became a symbol of North African independence from European oppression.

4. Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 24.

5. Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 5, and note 5 on 283.

6. For the pagan Berbers and Rome, see Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 50–80.

7. For more on Donatism, see Maureen Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: the Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

8. Latin survived on tombstones in Tripolitania as late as the middle of the eleventh century. The use of Latin was reportedly last used in Africa in the oases of Djerid in 1150 CE. Latin and Christianity, so closely allied, probably died together. Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 121.

9. Philo asserted that the Jewish population of Egypt was one million; during his life, two out of the five quarters of the city of Alexandria were inhabited by

Jews. This may have well been the most populous Jewish city in the first century. From Philo, trans. C. D. Younge "Against Flaccum," in *The Works of Philo Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993).

10. For more, see Paul Wexler, *The Non-Jewish Origins of the Sephardic Jews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

11. H. Z. (J. W.) Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," in *Journal of African History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1963): 314.

12. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 315.

13. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 315.

14. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 317.

15. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 317.

16. For more on two of the most important Berber Islamic empires, see Brett and Frentress, *The Berbers*, 105–119.

17. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 322–323.

18. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 330–331.

19. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 331.

20. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 332.

21. Hirschberg, "The Problem of Judaized Berbers," 333.

22. Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 2.

23. Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 4.

24. For an intricate explanation of the Muslim tradition of Hadiths of the Prophet, see Wael B. Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Hadith: A Pseudo-Problem," in *Studia Islamica*, no. 89 (1999): 75–90.

25. The Berbers started a revolt against the Arabs in 740 CE and initiated thirty years of nearly continual warfare. The Berbers felt that they were given an inadequate share of the spoils from the conquest of Spain and that they were generally mistreated by the Arabs. This set a pattern that would be repeated for the next several hundred years. Homegrown Berber Muslim dynasties would arise and often invade Spain from their North African strongholds. This was the case with the Almoravid Dynasty in the eleventh century and the Almohad Dynasty in the twelfth century.

26. Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 7.

27. Hannoum, *Colonial Histories, Post-Colonial Memories*, 7.

CHAPTER 8

1. Here I mean something very specific: the JAR and the State of Israel are the only political entities that were officially recognized by a government or governing body (the Soviet Union in the former, the United Nations in the latter) as designated Jewish polities.

2. For a short history of the history of Yiddish, including the formation of its dialects, see Max Weinreich, "History of the Yiddish Language: The Problems and Their Implications," in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 103, no. 4 (Aug. 15, 1959): 563–570.

3. The famous Jewish exegete Rashi (1040–1105 CE) (which is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi) spoke a variation of this language and used examples of

it in his commentaries, which are some of the oldest examples of Romance. See Miriam Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2001), 18–19.

4. A well-known example is *bentshn*, the word for a set of prayers following a meal. It most likely comes from the Latin *benedicere*, to bless. See Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 19.

5. For example, the most well-known Yiddish ending, “nik,” ultimately derived from Slavic languages.

6. For some of Herzl’s attitudes toward Yiddish, see page 7. For Ahad Ha’am’s attitudes toward Yiddish, see Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers and The Workman’s Circle Education Department, 1987), 88–89. Intellectual and political discussions in contemporary Israel have often focused on the Herzl/Ahad Ha’am cleft. In 2000, Israeli scholar Yoram Hazony published a critique of Israeli intellectual history, claiming that the recent academic trend of so-called “post-Zionism” was actually born alongside Zionism. He viewed Ahad Ha’am and his desire for a cultural center and not a sovereign state in Palestine as akin to modern, post-Zionist ideas. Herzl, on the other hand, represented the classic Zionist political position of support for a sovereign Jewish State in Palestine. See Tom Segev, trans. Haim Watzman, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post Zionism and the Americanization of Israel* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt, 2002), 133–134.

7. For Yiddish as used in traditional Jewish studies, see David Kotz, *Words on Fire, The Unfinished Story of Yiddish* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), chapter 6, “In the East.” For a general overview of life in traditional Yiddish speaking small towns, see Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 138–139.

8. For a general look at the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, and its relation to Yiddish, see Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 42–53; also Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 36–43. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) is considered the founder of the Haskalah. Often considered a leading figure in the reform of Judaism and its practices and beliefs, he is also often accused of helping the process of assimilation. Some look no further than his family: of his six children, only two remained Jews.

9. For Yiddish and Chasidism, see Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 42–53.

10. Kotz, *Words on Fire, The Unfinished Story of Yiddish*, 144–154.

11. Yiddish was divided into two large geographical divisions: Western and Eastern Yiddish. Eastern Yiddish was spoken by the vast majority of Jews in Europe, and this area was roughly broken up into different units, the main three being Northeastern, or Litvish; Mideastern or Poylish; and Southeastern or Ukrainianish. Because YIVO, The Yiddish Scientific Institute, was centered in Lithuania, the standard or prestige dialect of Yiddish became Litvish (with some modifications). Unlike other standardized languages, such as Florentine Italian, which became the prestige dialect of Italian and the basis of the modern standard language, Standard Yiddish was never a spoken language, nor was it used for the majority of literary productions. For an example of this standard Yiddish, see Uriel Weinreich, *College Yiddish: An Introduction to the Yiddish Language and to Jewish Life and Culture* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1976).

12. For a full treatment of Yiddish theater, see Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
13. See pages 4–11.
14. For more on the tension between the messianic element in Judaism and the more conservative orientation of Rabbinical Judaism, see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1–36. In the essay “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea,” Scholem plots the twists and turns of the messianic concept in Judaism as it erupted into actual messianic plots, was controlled in the guise of the Kaballah, and in more rationalistic schemes, such as in Moses Maimonides’s writings on the subject.
15. For more on the history of the Hebrew language, see Angel Sáenz-Badillo, *History of the Hebrew Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Edward Yechezkel Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1985).
16. Academic prejudice against Mishnaic Hebrew remained until fairly recently. Members of the Haskalah, which amounted to the Jewish arm of the Enlightenment, looked down on the language as yet another example of a slavish Jewish jargon. They associated it with the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, and with the backwardness of exile, and so preferred Biblical Hebrew. But when the Hebrew language was revived in Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mishnaic Hebrew was employed by Hebrew speakers to fashion a flexible grammar, expanded vocabulary, and diction. See W. Chomsky, “What Was the Jewish Vernacular during the Second Commonwealth?” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 42, no. 2 (October 1951): 193–212.
17. Despite Yiddish’s influence on the Hebrew spoken in Israel (See Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 233), the language was derided in the Jewish state; violent clashes often took place in attempts to prevent its use. When Yiddish no longer posed any threat to Hebrew’s hegemony in Israel, it was more favorably received. For more on the struggle of languages in the British Mandate in Palestine, see Segev, *One Palestine Complete*, 263–269.
18. Traditional European attitudes against Jews varied, but in the Middle Ages, prejudices against Jews were primarily religious and theological. Once a Jew converted to Christianity, the issue of his or her religion was theoretically dead. In the nineteenth century, as race theories began to be promulgated, Jews were increasingly viewed as members of a separate race called the Semites. No action on the part of an individual Jew could erase his or her membership in the Jewish race.
19. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 56–58.
20. Yiddish literature was so dominated by short fiction that it was not until relatively late that Yiddish writers began to attempt larger-scale works, including “family” novels, which is a genre that had been written in Western Europe since the mid-nineteenth century. With each year after the Second World War, there were fewer Yiddish readers, and the once vibrant scene of Yiddish literature began a long decline. Many consider the Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1978 to be Yiddish literature’s swan song. For more on the novel in Yiddish literature, see Irving Howe’s introduction to I. J. Singer, *The Brothers Ashkenazi*, translated by Joseph Singer (New York: Penguin Books, 1980).

21. Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 69–70.
22. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 99–100.
23. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 101.
24. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 104–105.
25. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 105–106.
26. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 108.
27. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 109.
28. Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 81. For an extended treatment of the Czernowitz Conference, see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 183–221.
29. For Birnbaum's transformation to an Orthodox Jew, see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 227–230.
30. For a map of the Pale of Settlement, see Gilbert, *The Atlas of Jewish History*, 72.
31. Shlomo Lambroza, "The Tsarist Government and the Pogroms of 1903–06" in *Modern Judaism*, vol. 7, no. 3 (October 1987): 287–296 and I. Michael Aronson, "Geographical and Socioeconomic Factors in the 1881 Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia" in *Russian Review*, vol. 39, no. 1 (January 1980): 18–31.
32. William C. Hine, "American Slavery and Russian Serfdom: A Preliminary Comparison," in *Phylon*, vol. 36, no. 4 (4th Qtr. 1975): 378–384.
33. For more on Chaim Zhitlovsky, an influential Yiddishist, see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 161–181.
34. This romantic attachment to the land can be seen in Tolstoy's Christianity and in his novels. For example Levin, an aristocratic landowner in *Anna Karenina*, enjoys mowing his meadow with his serfs as a way of "regaining his temper." See Harold K. Schefski, "Tolstoy's Urban-Rural Continuum in 'War and Peace' and 'Anna Karenina,'" in *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 1981): 27–41.
35. For more on the Romantic attachment of the early Zionist movement to agriculture and land, see Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*, 293, and Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, 256. An early figure in Zionism's romanticism of nature was A. D. Gordon (1856–1922). He emigrated from Russia in his forties and worked as an agricultural laborer. He believed that all the ills of the Jews could be traced to their estrangement from the land, and his nature mysticism was extremely influential for later Zionism.
36. Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: An Illustrated History, 1928–1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 5.
37. Hebrew was the only language that the Soviets made "virtually illegal." Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 6.
38. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 16–17.
39. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 18–21.
40. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 21.
41. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 20.
42. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 28; this was the case with immigration to Palestine as well. Although the early Zionist mythology stressed agricultural labor as the norm, most Jews lived in cities and did not work the soil.
43. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 31.
44. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 43.
45. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 9 and Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 254–256.

46. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 57.
47. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 43–53.
48. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 59–67.
49. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 66–67.
50. The Volga Germans were in 1762 invited by Catherine the Great to settle in lands recently conquered from the Tartars. This was part of an overall settlement policy initiated by the Empress to bring Europeans into newly acquired Russian territory. A large population of Germans in the heartland of Russia was often a problem for the Russian leadership, but in the early years of the Soviet Union, the spirit of a multiethnic, multilingual socialist state benefited the Volga Germans, although less than other minorities (the Volga Germans, as mainly conservative, religious Protestants, supported the Whites in the Russian Civil War). However, in 1924, shortly before he died, Lenin created the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In many ways, this Soviet Republic mirrored the JAR (with the exception that the Volga German's republic existed in lands largely settled by Germans, whereas the JAR was supposed to import its Jews). Stalin, fearing that the Volga Germans would become a Fifth Column during the Second World War, deported them *en masse* to Russia's eastern provinces—particularly Kazakhstan—with great loss of life. Fred Koch, *The Volga Germans, In Russia and the Americas, From 1763 to the Present* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).
51. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 67.
52. The Soviets set about to rework Yiddish. In general, they attempted to remove words of obvious Hebrew and German derivation, replacing them with Slavic equivalents. The Soviet Yiddish became something of a joke in the wider Yiddish world. See Weinstein, *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, 95–96.
53. After the Second World War, Kalinin referred to the JAR as a Jewish nation state, which would regenerate Soviet Jews through creative toil. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 72.
54. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 80.
55. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 82.
56. In the "Doctors' Plot" six of the nine doctors arrested were Jews; Samson Madievski, "The Doctor's Plot," in *Midstream*, September/October 2003, volume XXXIX, no. 6.
57. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 84.
58. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 85.
59. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 85.
60. Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion*, 87; for a map of the JAR, see Gilbert, *The Atlas of Jewish History*, 92.
61. In the post-Soviet years, there occurred yet another spate of departures from the JAR. This mirrored the general trend in the Soviet Union and its successor states: by the year 2000 Israel had received a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, about one Russian for every four native Israelis. Tom Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem*, 107.
62. The JAR actively promotes its Jewish identity. It organized the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of its founding in 2004, and the government maintains a web page at: www.eao.ru/eng/. In 2002, the JAR received its first formally

trained rabbi in several decades. In 2004, a new synagogue was constructed. In the summer of 2007 and 2008, the JAR, through the auspices of Bar-Ilan University in Israel, hosted an International Summer Yiddish School.

63. For the fate of Yiddish in modern times, see Kotz, *Words on Fire*, chapters 10 and 11.

64. Pawel, *The Labyrinth of Exile*, 319.

65. Newspapers were extraordinarily important to the development of the Yiddish language and to the promulgation of its literature, poetry, politics, and culture. Kotz, *Words on Fire*, 200–202.

66. For popular works about the ultraorthodox, primarily Yiddish-speaking Chasidic groups, see Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schoken Books, 1992) and Robert Eisenberg, *Boychiks in the Hood, Travels in the Hasidic Underground* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).

CHAPTER 9

1. The primary Roman document about the revolt of Bar Kokhba is from Dio Cassius (155–235 CE), whose *Roman History* briefly chronicles the event and the aftermath. Following the revolt, most of Judea was destroyed: “Fifty of their most important outposts and one hundred and eighty five of their most famous villages were razed to the ground. Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, disease and fire was past all finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judea was made desolate.” Mordedchai Gichon, “New Insight into the Bar Kokhba War and a Reappraisal of Dio Cassius 69.12–13” in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Ser., vol. 77, no. 1 (July 1986): 15–43.

2. Many Jewish communities remained in Palestine but not in Jerusalem. The most significant ones were found in Galilee, which did not bear the brunt of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion. Shmuel Katz, *Battleground: Fact and Fantasy in Palestine*, (New York: Steimatzky/Shapolsky, 1985), 86.

3. Early during the British Mandate period, and before the founding of the State of Israel, orthodox groups, many well organized politically (most notably *Agudat Israel*), did not endorse the founding of the State of Israel and sometimes actively fought it. One radical group in Jerusalem called *Neturei Karta*, or “The Guardians of the City,” claimed that the founding of the Jewish state broke three vows that God had imposed on the Jews: not to rebel against the gentiles in the lands where they lived, not to seize the Holy Land by force, and not to hasten the end of days. Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*, 238–239. In 2007, members of *Neturei Karta* met with Iranian president Ahmadinejad at a conference dedicated to questioning the validity of the Holocaust, much to the anger of many other Jewish groups.

4. “Bar Kokhba” means “son of the star” and was taken to mean that he was the messiah meant to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression. In later Talmudic literature, this name was used to denigrate him and his failed revolt by changing his name to Bar Kozeba or Kosiba, meaning “son of deceit.” Solomon Zeitlin, “Bar Kokhba and Bar Kozeba” in *Jewish Daily Review*, New Ser., vol. 43, no.1 (July 1952): 77–82.

5. See page 39–40 for the Samaritans. For more on these two groups, see Robert T. Anderson, *The Keepers: An Introduction to the History and Culture of the Samaritans* (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 2002) and Fred Astren, *Karite Judaism and Historical Understanding* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004).

6. Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins*, 7.

7. Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins*, 7.

8. Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins*, 7.

9. Most Siddurs, or prayer books used during synagogue services, contain a prayer for the government recited along with prayers for the community after the Torah reading. See David de Sola Pool, ed. and trans., *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Book Inc., by arrangement with Behrman House Inc., 1960).

10. For more on the complex and evolving relationship of the State of Israel and Israelis toward the Holocaust, see Tom Segev, trans. Haim Watzman, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991). Many historians do not see Israel embracing the Holocaust as part of its collective history until the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1961–1962. Eichmann was one of the planners of the Holocaust. He fled Germany after the Second World War but was captured by Israeli agents in Argentina in 1960 and brought to Israel for trial. The trial generated immense media coverage in Israel and brought the Holocaust to the Israeli public as no previous event had.

11. See page 31 for the Beta Israel.

12. See page 53 for the Khazars.

13. See page 79 for the Jewish kingdom in Himyar and the Jews of Hijaz.

14. See page 97 for the Kingdom of Adiabene.

15. See page 113 for the Kahina.

16. See page 123 for the JAR.

17. The modern era saw the rise of “denominations” in Judaism. For a short treatment of these, see George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs & Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 55–68.

18. Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity, The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magus Press, The Hebrew University, 1998), 21.

19. Robinson, *Essential Judaism*, 178.

20. The Law of Return was passed in 1950 by the Knesset and received many modifications over the years. For an English translation of its wording and amendments, see the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs web page: www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

21. This clause was added in an amendment to the Law of Return in 1970:

“4A. (a) The rights of a Jew under this Law and the rights of an oleh under the Nationality Law, 5712-1952***, as well as the rights of an oleh under any other enactment, are also vested in a child and a grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew, except for a person who has been a Jew and has voluntarily changed his religion.” Again from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs web page: www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

22. For instance, Arab and Druze residents of the State of Israel are Israeli citizens and technically have all the rights of Jewish Israelis.

23. The "Jewish" character of the Russian immigrants was always in question. Long separated from many of the religious and nationalistic currents of Jewish life behind the Iron Curtain, Russian Jews suffered an identity crisis, not only among themselves, but in the eyes of Israelis who questioned their Jewish affiliation. At one time, nearly half the immigrants from the former Soviet Union were technically non-Jews. Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem*, 108.

24. The laws concerning mamzerim have been so controversial that most rabbinical authorities try to steer clear of actively classifying anyone as a mamzer. See *Ha'aretz*, 7-9-06 www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/756433.html. Since marriage and divorce are subject to religious law in the State of Israel, marriage is governed by somewhat archaic religious customs, even though the overwhelming majority of Israelis are secular. For example, Ron Arad, Israel's most famous MIA/POW, was captured in Lebanon in 1986 and kept by various Shiite groups. He was last heard from in 1987. His wife, according to Rabbinical definition, is abandoned, or *aguna* (literally "chained or anchored" in Hebrew) and cannot divorce her husband or be considered a widow until some evidence of his death is provided. Sara Leibovich-Dar, *Ha'aretz*, 6 September 2001, "Who Will Save Tami Arad?"

25. In 1947, an informal compromise was worked out between David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, and rabbinical officials. The Rabbinate was given control of marriages and divorces in the State of Israel (i.e., there would be no civil marriage), and in return they agreed to offer no objections when the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) visited the country to investigate partition. See Segev, 1949: *The First Israelis*, 249–250.

26. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish religious authority became decentralized. Jews recognized certain academies and rabbis as sources on *halakic* matters, but there was certainly no one central authority. As such, Judaism became a religion that looked to local authorities for decisions on religious and social matters. The decentralized nature of Judaism continues to this day.

27. There are many books and articles written about potential candidates for descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Tudor Parfitt has written about certain groups he sees as main contenders. For more, see Tudor Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

28. Parfitt, *Lost Tribes*, 8.

29. For the theory of Arthur Koestler on the Khazar ancestry of Ashkenazi Jews, see Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, 141–200.

30. Many scholars once believed that the Jews of Yemen were descended from Arab converts to Judaism. There may have been an element of racism in this approach since the Yemeni Jews were one of the first communities of Oriental or Asian Jews who were well-known to the West.

31. The Jews of Morocco possess many "Berber" customs, either because of their long residence among Berber peoples or because they are descended from Berber converts, or possibly both. Foremost among these practices is a pronounced tendency to venerate saints. For more, see Isschar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

32. The large influx of Soviet Jews to Israel during the 1990s, however, did cause social conflicts. The sheer numbers of immigrants from the former Soviet Union show how complex the resettlement issue of this group was; for six years, from 1989 to 1994, about eight hundred thousand Jews from lands of the former Soviet Union left the country. About five hundred forty thousand headed for Israel, while the remainder went mainly to the United States. For more on this, see Noah Lewin Epstein, Yaakov Ro'el, and Paul Ritterband, editors, *Russian Jews on Three Continents, Migration and Resettlement* (London: Routledge, 1997).

33. For a graphic representation of this exodus, see Gilbert, *The Atlas of Jewish History*, 110.

34. See page 38.

35. See Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia* (New York: Stein & Day, 1985), for an extended treatment of the airlift of Ethiopian Jews from Sudan.

36. Parfitt, *Operation Moses*, 46.

37. Parfitt, *Operation Moses*, 89–107.

38. For a detailed treatment of Operation Solomon, see Stephen Spector, *Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

39. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity, The Case of Ethiopian Jewry*, 116–117.

40. Such as the Bene Israel of India and other Jewish groups from the subcontinent. See Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity, The Case of Ethiopian Jewry*, 24–27.

41. There is no consensus on the origin of the Falash Mura. Most likely, they are descendants of Beta Israel who converted to Christianity, with varying levels of a real shift in religious affiliation, from 1855 onward. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity, The Case of Ethiopian Jewry*, 120–121.

42. The Law of Return allows for non-Jewish family members to immigrate to Israel. This is covered in the Amendment to the Law of Return, 1970, and found at the web page of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs: www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

43. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 120, 122.

44. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 123.

45. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 131–132.

46. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 129.

47. See above, note 32.

48. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 18–19.

49. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 133.

50. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 133.

51. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity*, 133.

52. For the close connections in the practices and everyday lives of Ethiopian Jews and Christians, see Hagar Salomon, *The Hyena People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

53. After much debate in the late 1990s, the Israeli government in 2004 agreed to bring the remaining Falash Mura to Israel. As of this writing, the Israeli government has not been able to bring them in large numbers. The Ethiopian government has blocked attempts to stage large-scale airlifts like Operation Sheba

and Operation Solomon. See "Israel To Bring Last of Ethiopian Jews 'Home'" by Tsegaye Tadesse, Addis Ababa, January 10, 2004, Reuters News Service. In 2005, the BBC reported that some Falash Mura, many living in camps for eight years or more while waiting to immigrate to Israel, went on a hunger strike to protest the delay. Only a small-scale immigration of three hundred Falash Mura per month has been approved: see news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4265128.stm. The Falash Mura must undergo a conversion course upon immigration to Israel. Their status as Jews continues to be questioned, however, and causes no small amount of difficulty in their adjustment to life in Israel. See "Falash Mura Face 'Who is a Jew' Issue at Mevaseret Zion Shul," in the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel.jpost.com, July 10, 2006.

54. There are fears that the number of Falash Muras seeking to immigrate to Israel could reach extremely high, nearly untenable numbers if they are allowed to enter the country. The Falash Mura receive a generous package from the State of Israel once they arrive. They live for up to two years in absorption centers, where they learn Hebrew, study Judaism, and grow accustomed to life in Israel. After this, they receive 90 percent of the funds needed to purchase a home. This provides a strong incentive for the Falash Mura to immigrate to Israel. The allure has caused concern among immigration officials in Israel that there will be an endless aliyah, or no end to the potentially eligible Falash Mura who attempt to immigrate to the State of Israel. For example, in 1998 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a ceremony at Ben-Gurion Airport to welcome what his government called the last plane of Falash Mura immigrants. But within just a few days, over eight thousand more Falash Mura poured into Addis Ababa and Gondar to petition Israeli agencies for aliyah. That number soon ballooned to fourteen thousand. One reporter traveled into the remote countryside of Ethiopia and found many people who claimed Falash Mura identity but knew little of Judaism. One Israeli official stated that Falash Mura identity is not one thing, but a mix; people who claim to be Falash Mura come from diverse backgrounds and have different levels of knowledge and identification with Judaism.

These concerns are compounded by practical and financial problems. It is estimated that it costs nearly \$100,000 for Israel to absorb each immigrant over the course of his or her life. There is no clear estimate of how many of the seventy million people in Ethiopia will seek Falash Mura status. But there are fears that many of the individuals petitioning to come to Israel are not really Jews. Indeed, even some leaders of the Beta Israel community in Israel have expressed doubts about the Jewish credentials of recent Falash Mura arrivals. One explains: "Today, the aliya of the Falash Mura has turned into a business . . . Not all those coming are Jews. There are those who buy a Jewish identity, and those who sell a Jewish identity." From *B'nai B'rith Magazine*, "Israel's Newest Immigrants: Who are the 'Falash Mura'?" Summer 2007, by Uriel Heilman.

As of this writing (April 2009) it is unclear how long the Falsah Mura immigration will continue; even though nine thousand to fifteen thousand Falash Mura have claimed eligibility, the Israeli government has cut back funds in 2009 to support their immigration. From the *Jerusalem Post*, "Cutbacks Threaten Falash Mura Aliya," April 30, 2009, by Ruth Eglash.

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